BASKETBALL PREVIEW

The Final Fours

MEN: Gonzaga, Texas, Kansas, UCLA
WOMEN: UConn, South Carolina, Stanford, Maryland

Sports Illustrated

DOUBLE ISSUE
NOVEMBER 1-2, 2021
VOLUME 132 | NOS. 12/13
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NEXT LEVEL

The NBA Stars of Tomorrow Are Here Today

TRAE YOUNG
Hawks Guard

LUKA DONČIĆ
Mavs Guard

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TRAE YOUNG
Photograph by Kevin D. Liles in Atlanta Sept. 27

LUKA DONČIĆ
Photograph by Greg Nelson in Dallas Sept. 27

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LINEUP

DOUBLE ISSUE
NOVEMBER 1–2, 2021
VOLUME 132 NOS. 12/13

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LINEUP

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BASKETBALL PREVIEW

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G FIUME/MARYLAND TERRAPINS/GETTY IMAGES

LEADING OFF

WE MAY HAVE BEEN SPOILED. ON THE HEELS OF AN INCREDIBLE RUN OF SUCCESS BY ROOKIE QUARTERBACKS, AND ONE YEAR AFTER WATCHING JUSTIN HERBERT IMMEDIATELY ESTABLISH HIMSELF AS ONE OF THE ELITE (WITH JOE BURROW NOT FAR BEHIND BEFORE A SEASON-ENDING INJURY), WE EXPECTED GREATNESS WHEN THE QB CLASS OF 2021 STEPPED ON THE FIELD. BUT EVEN WITH FIVE QUARTERBACKS WHO WERE DRAFTED IN THE TOP 15 (ALL BUT THE 49ERS' TREY LANCE STARTED A GAME IN THE SEASON'S FIRST MONTH), THIS YEAR'S CROP GOT OFF TO A PAINFULLY SLOW START. IT BROUGHT BACK MEMORIES OF, AMONG OTHER IGNOMINIOUS BEGINNINGS, PEYTON MANNING'S 28-INTERCEPTION SEASON IN 1998, STILL THE HIGHEST TOTAL FOR A ROOKIE. AND IT'S A REMINDER THAT, AS WITH MOST 20-SOMETHINGS STARTING A NEW JOB, THERE WILL BE A STEEP LEARNING CURVE

STARTER *LESSONS*

JUSTIN FIELDS
CHICAGO BEARS

After waiting an eternity for a franchise QB, Bears fans are putting their outsized hopes on Fields's shoulders. His first start—behind a line unable to handle the Browns' formidable pass rush—was a reminder for patience: Fields took more sacks (nine) in the Week 3 defeat than he had completions (six).

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICK W. RASCO

DAVIS MILLS
HOUSTON TEXANS

Forced into action by an injury to Tyrod Taylor, Mills became the first non-first-round rookie QB to start in 2021, getting the call for a Week 3, Thursday-night game against the Panthers. He held up his end, executing a conservative game plan after a short week of preparation, but it wasn't enough to avoid a 24–9 loss.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
GREG NELSON

TREVOR LAWRENCE

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

Lawrence's early-season struggles (seven interceptions in his first three games) raised a few alarms but haven't changed Jacksonville's view that the No. 1 pick will lead the team to greater things.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GREG NELSON

ZACH WILSON

NEW YORK JETS

The third QB the Jets have drafted among the top five since 2009, Wilson has learned firsthand that it's not easy being green, with a 51.6 passer rating in September.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICK W. RASCO

MAC JONES
NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

After beating out Cam Newton for the starting job, Jones enjoyed the smoothest transition to the pros among the rookie passers—at least until throwing three interceptions in a Week 3 loss to the Saints. Before that, Jones had no turnovers in his first two starts (a narrow loss to the Dolphins and a victory over the Jets).

PHOTOGRAPH BY
CARLOS M. SAAVEDRA

PATRIOTS

SCORECARD

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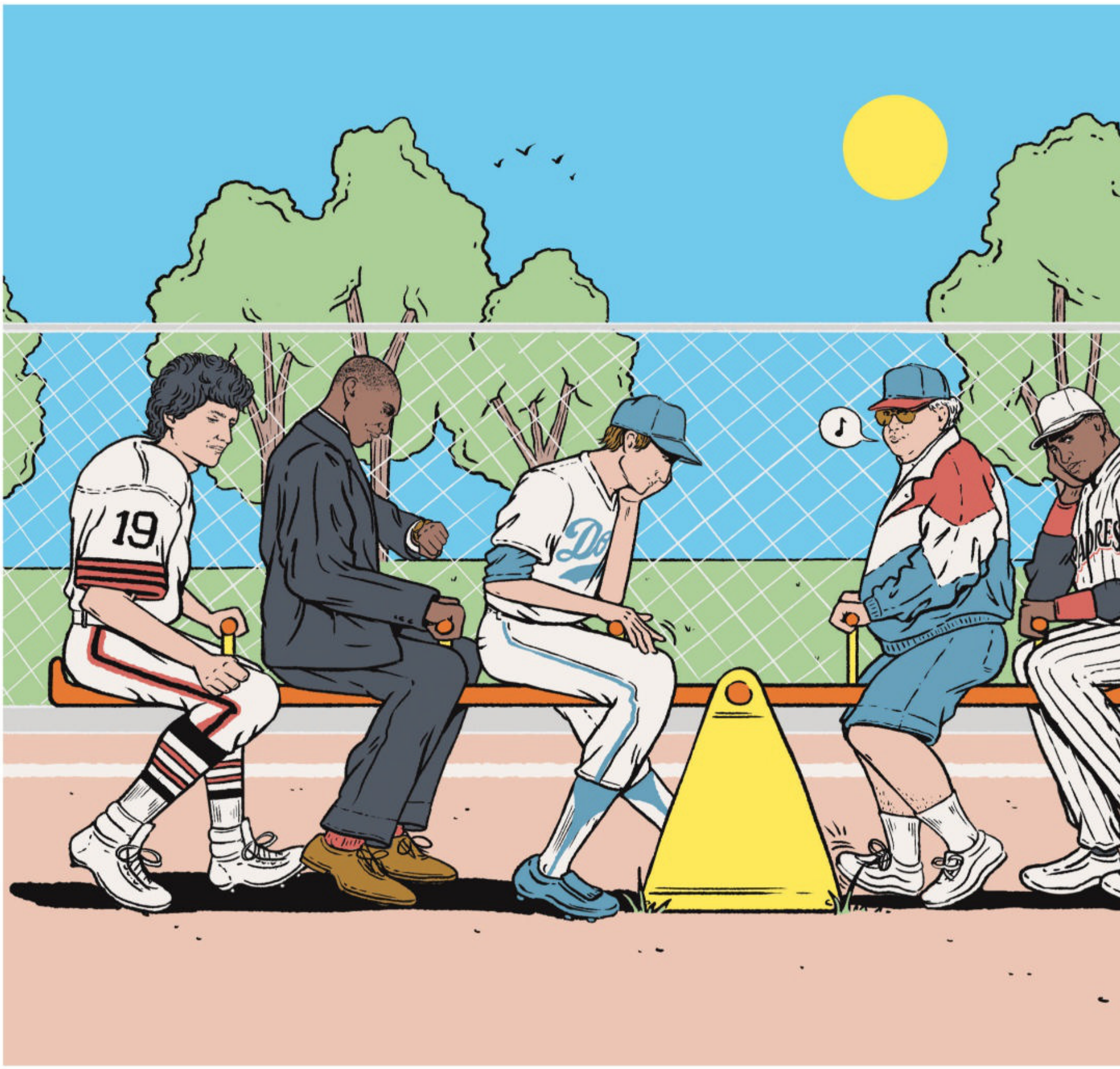


BALANCING ACT

AS THE NFL GOES TO 17 GAMES, THE TIME HAS COME TO CELEBRATE WHAT WILL BE A FAR LESS FREQUENT OCCURRENCE: THE .500 SEASON

BY STEVE RUSHIN ▸ ILLUSTRATION BY CAT SIMS

TWO LATIN WORDS, *medius* ("middle") and *ocris* ("mountain"), joined hands in the 16th century to make a new word—*mediocre*—that described anything of middling stature: neither peak nor valley, neither tall nor short, neither Manute Bol nor Muggsy Bogues. Most of us reside there, between Mount Everest and the Marianas Trench, in the safer elevations of mediocrity.

Sports are meant to be deliverance from all that, with their built-in extremes, their binary heroes and GOATs, the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. Win or lose, you will feel something, unless of course you draw. But a tie is a small sample size, of little statistical meaning. For sustained mediocrity, achieved over an entire year, there is only the sister-kissing marathon of the .500 season.

"Nobody wants a .500 record," Browns wide receiver Clarence Weathers said in 1985, when Cleveland finished 8–8. And now that the NFL schedule has manspread to 17 games, no team in that league will have to go 8–8 again (though a team truly dedicated to mediocrity may yet go 8-8-1). Let the Raiders claim a Commitment to Excellence; 8-8-1 will require a Commitment to Meh. Those 8–8 Browns of '85 made the playoffs and promptly lost to the Dolphins to finish 8–9, proving Weathers's point that nobody who can possibly avoid it wants a winning percentage of .500.

"We're not a great team," Dolphins guard Roy Foster told the *Miami Herald* after seven games into the 1989 season, "but we're not an 8–8 team." That Miami team finished 8–8 and served, for fans, as a 16-week sensory-deprivation chamber. If you've forgotten the '89 Dolphins but remember the '72 Dolphins who went undefeated—or the '76 Buccaneers who went winless—that's because history regards the great and the terrible but forgets the mass in the middle. Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible echo down the ages; no one builds monuments to Dale the Unremarkable.

Perhaps we should. In baseball, the Angels have been a Rhapsody in Blah. The team had an all-time

winning percentage of .499 coming into this season, its 61st, and predictably hovered around .500 for most of 2021. The two best players in the game, Shohei Ohtani and Mike Trout, make no difference to their .500 mojo. If the Angels were a ride at nearby Disneyland, they would be neither the Matterhorn nor the Submarine Voyage, but something comfortably in between, keeping fans safe from both altitude sickness and the bends.

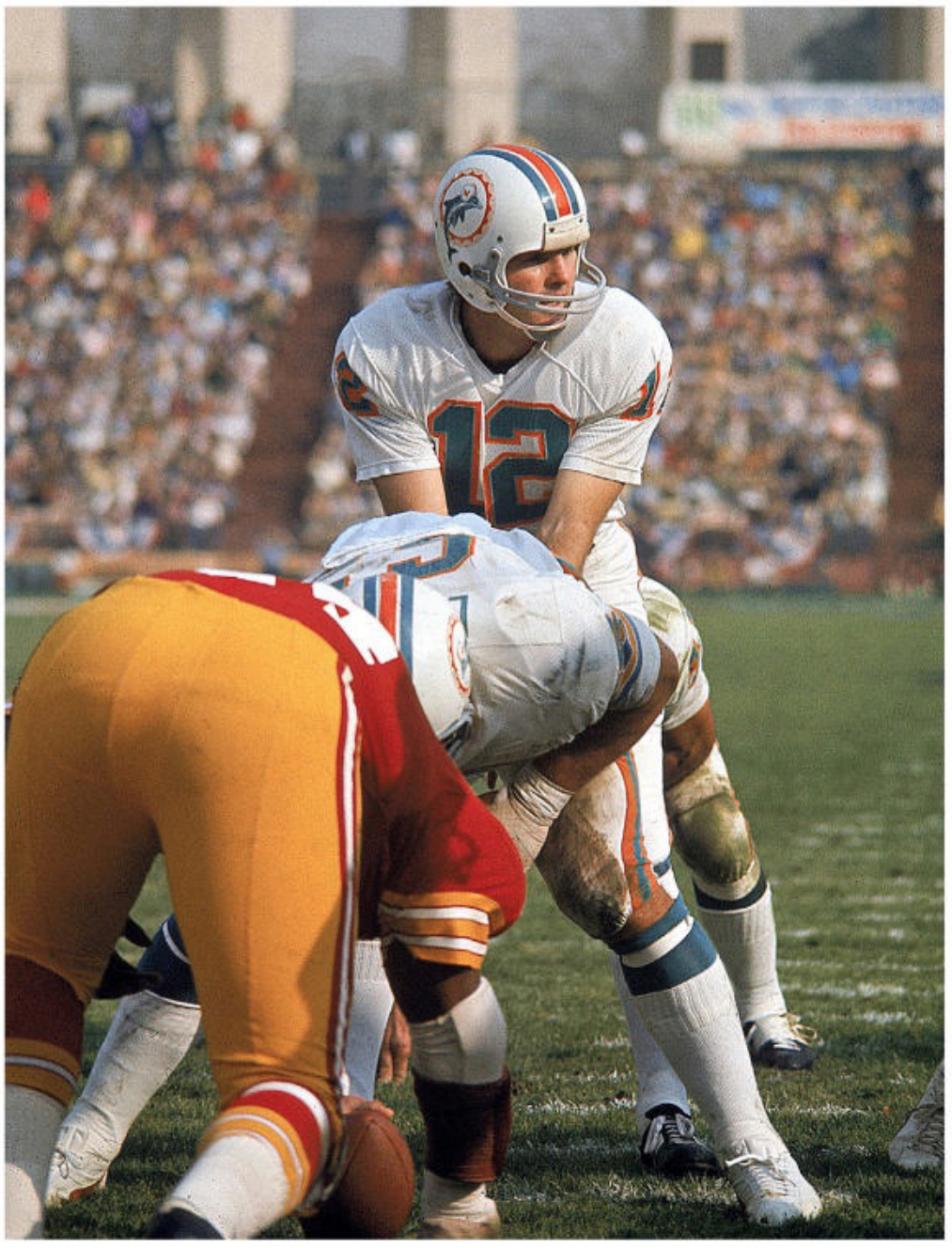
In 1986, his first season as a head coach in the NFL, Buddy Ryan witnessed a game of historic ineptitude between his Eagles and the St. Louis Cardinals. The teams combined to miss three game-winning field goals in overtime, which ended in a 10–10 draw. Ryan would be coach for 111 games over seven years and retire with a regular-season record of 55-55-1. That tie forever placed him in the company of knuckleballer Charlie Hough (216–216 lifetime record); Daniel Day-Lewis and Frances McDormand (both of whom are 3–3 lifetime in acting Oscars); and the Trappist monk and spiritual seeker Thomas Merton, who wrote, "We cannot be happy if we expect to live all the time at the highest peak of intensity. Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance."

By summer 2020, Rafael Nadal had played 2,612 games against Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic combined. The Spaniard had won 1,306 of them and lost 1,306 of them, at which point the three greatest men's tennis players ever, indisputably at a stalemate, should have just agreed to disagree.

"If you look at my overall career," Roger Craig said upon his retirement in 1992 after 37 years as a player, coach and manager in the big leagues, "I'm going out a winner." That can't be said of Charley Winner, who was 44-44-5 as coach of the NFL's St. Louis Cardinals and the Jets, but it *is* true of Craig, who went 738–737 over 10 seasons managing the Padres and Giants. Career records turn on bad hops and seeing-eye singles. NHL goalie Nikolai Khabibulin won 333 games over 18 seasons but lost 334, his record besmirched by a single puck. Puck, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, said, "What fools these mortals be," and it's true: Only a simpleton would reduce a life's work to a winning percentage.

IN THE EXTREME

History tends to remember teams such as the winless 1976 Bucs and the perfect '72 Dolphins (left).



NEIL LEIFER (DOLPHINS); FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES (BUCCANEERS)

The person who goes .500 in life, after all, has had a good run. Wilbert Robinson won the last two games of the 1931 season with the Brooklyn Robins, upping his lifetime managerial record to 1,399–1,398, after which he retired, triumphant. He died three years later, of a brain hemorrhage, after falling in his hotel room, but not before asking a reporter to "make a funny story about it. Say your Uncle Wilbert slipped on a banana peel." This was a man who knew, as Monty Python did, that life is "all a show, keep 'em laughing as you go."

Around every corner lies a banana peel. Ask the 1982 Padres. They went 81–81 that year but left unfinished business. In '83, San Diego became the five-hundredest team in sports history, going 81–81 again, but this time scoring 653 runs while allowing 653.

Those Padres may have seemed to be running in place, exhausting themselves on the Great Hamster Wheel of Futility, but they were really moving forward. In 1984 they won the NL while wearing sleeve patches to commemorate owner Ray Kroc, who died that year, the same year the company he founded—McDonald's—launched the McDLT, which was both a sandwich and a metaphor.

The McDLT was a hamburger served in a segregated clam box, with the steaming patty in one compartment and the crisp lettuce and tomato in the other. "Keep the hot side hot, and the cool side cool," went its advertising slogan, for the McDLT acknowledged what sports fans already knew. We have a taste for things piping hot. We enjoy things that are freezing cold. But our dull palates cannot abide, nor scarcely even remember, the tepid, room-temp, lukewarm in between. □

BOB METELUS

WADING IN

INTIMATE PHOTOGRAPHS REVEAL THE MANY FACETS OF A FUTURE HALL OF FAMER

READ

DWYANE, by Dwyane Wade

For more than a decade Bob Metelus has been documenting the on- and off-court lives of Dwyane Wade. The collaboration resulted in the 2020 film *D. Wade: Life Unexpected*, and now in *Dwyane*, a photo-driven book that offers a candid look at one of the most fascinating men to ever play in the NBA.

Metelus's behind-the-scenes shots are supplemented by great action—Wade, 39, was an All-Star guard in 13 of his 16 seasons—but it's the quiet, nonhoops photos that stand out, such as Wade helping his nephew get ready for prom.

Wade and his wife, Gabrielle Union, are raising four children, including Wade's 14-year-old transgender daughter, Zaya. In addition to family photos, *Dwyane* contains prose from Wade, whose awe for his daughter is apparent and touching: "I've been in pressure-packed situations on the court before, but what Zaya did blew all of that out the water."

LISTEN

FALSE IDOL

Hosted by former SI writer Tim Rohan, the bingeable *Idol* goes deep on Oscar Pistorius, the Paralympic South African sprinter who killed his girlfriend in 2013, focusing on the people whose lives the Blade Runner upended.

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HISTORY

HORNS DILEMMA

PHOTOGRAPH BY KOHJIRO KINNO

IS IT or isn't it? A year ago, a collector we'll call Mr. H (he prefers anonymity) spent $40,000 on goods from the estate of former Cleveland and Los Angeles Rams running back Frank Gehrke, including a helmet. He then became convinced the beat-up leather artifact was in fact "like a rare Picasso or Rembrandt": the first helmet ever to be adorned with a logo.

Gehrke got the idea to paint gold horns on his helmet in the summer of 1948. (They were changed to white because they showed up better on television.) Doodles and other horn outlines were visible on the helmet *(above)*, leading Mr. H to believe he had landed the actual prototype. His quest to divine its authenticity took a year and involved the Hall of Fame, the Rams, Gehrke's wife and SPORTS ILLUSTRATED senior writer-detective Greg Bishop. The helmet is a reminder of how one man's art doodlings changed a sport.

Read about Bishop's investigation at **SI.com/ramshelmet**.

Q&A

MONSTER'S BRAWL

WITH THE NEW MOVIE *BRUISED*, OSCAR-WINNING ACTRESS HALLE BERRY SLIDES BEHIND THE CAMERA AND INTO THE RING

BY L. JON WERTHEIM

THEY ***OOOH*** and *ahhh* when fists collide violently with faces, when bones break, when the plasma starts spurting. They wave and wink when the cameras spot them. But the celebrities who—inevitably, these days—ring the front rows of UFC fights? They seldom know the subtleties of mixed martial arts, much less grasp what the combatants are enduring.

That's not so for Halle Berry. A veteran of dozens of films—including *Monster's Ball*, which won her an Oscar in 2002—Berry, now 55, could not resist the familiar seduction of directing. But the urge would take her to an unfamiliar place: the inside of a steel cage. Almost five years ago, Berry read a script about an Irish Catholic woman in her 20s who uses fighting to find redemption. Berry made the equivalent of a few strategic adjustments. She changed the sport from boxing to MMA. She switched the lead role to be a woman of color, and considerably older. She set the story in Newark, a city that sits both close to the bright lights of Manhattan and immeasurably far away.

Perhaps most critically, Berry cast herself as the lead, a disgraced former fighter and put-upon single mother who stages a comeback. To train for the role of Jackie Justice, Berry spent months in various gyms, marrying the capoeira skills she recalled from *Catwoman* (and the agility she had as a young gymnast) with boxing, wrestling, kickboxing and jiujitsu. The result: Berry gets high marks overall and special recognition for execution during the fight scenes. (Still, it didn't prevent her from getting battered and bruised on the set by Valentina Shevchenko, a top UFC fighter in real life and Jackie's bruising rival, Lady Killer, in the film.)

Berry's directorial debut, *Bruised*—imperfect but ultimately a triumph—hits theaters Nov. 17

JOHN BAER/NETFLIX

LABOR OF GLOVE

For Berry (right), a 32-year acting career comes full octagon with a stint in the director's chair.

and lands on Netflix on Nov. 24. The film tells the story of Jackie as she sets her sights on regaining much of what she has lost. Berry has firsthand intimacy with more than a few themes undergirding *Bruised*—ascent, descent, comeback, domestic violence, self-sufficiency—but the director-star insists that the film is rooted in the universal, not the personal. She simply wanted to enter the familiar genre of the sports movie, apply her own touch (and blood and sweat) and create a heroine in the most raw and violent sport going.

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: *When you started this project, what was your level of interest/passion/knowledge for MMA?*

HALLE BERRY: I grew up a huge sports fan. Being a latchkey kid, watching boxing was always one of my favorite pastimes. And then Ronda Rousey came around, and my interest for MMA sparked. I finally got to see a woman being part of what you would consider a blood sport, and sort of in a man's world—but at the top of the sport. I became a huge fan at that moment.

SI: *If we were going to connect the art of fighting to the art of making movies, where would you begin?*

HB: It's equally as hard and as taxing and as trying. It's equally as challenging for women to find our place and find our voice and be treated fairly and equally. I put them on par with one another.

POETIC JUSTICE
Berry's character, Jackie, finds a rival in Lady Killer, played by real-life UFC fighter Shevchenko (far right).

SI: *It strikes me that directing has some MMA in it. You have all these different skills to combine. Instead of stand-up and kicking and ground game, it's visual and writing and structure. This is new territory for you. What did you learn about yourself in terms of your strengths?*

HB: I learned that my 32 years of being an actor, they really came into play for me as a director.

SI: *How so?*

HB: I knew how to talk to actors, and be with actors, and get the most out of actors. Because I know what it feels like when I'm working with the director and they know how to talk to me. If you can't get the actors to do what you need them to do, then you are really going to struggle telling your story, no matter how pretty the pictures look.

SI: *Some people get a fight and they're like:* I'm never doing that again. *Others are like:* I got the bug. Where are you with directing?

HB: Oh, I got the bug. I may not star *and* direct again. It wasn't my intention to do it this way—it just ended up being this way. I didn't set out to direct my first film and have such a monster role. Once I got into it, I thought this was kind of suicidal. *Why did I decide to do this?* But having done that now, there's certainly a sense of accomplishment. I faced it and I rose to it. But I can't say I would choose to do that again.

SI: *What did you learn talking to so many MMA fighters—especially female MMA fighters?*

"THERE'S A SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT [IN ACTING AND DIRECTING]. BUT I CAN'T SAY I WOULD CHOOSE TO DO THAT AGAIN."

HB: This isn't the case for *all* fighters, but what I learned is that, more often than not, female fighters fight to get their power back, to get their voice back. Many of them have been abused and, as women—marginalized as we have been—they're fighting for their power. Whereas men are usually fighting, I found, to be the breadwinners of the family, to rise out of poverty, to be the head of their household. They're fighting for different reasons. And I certainly wanted to add that element to our character, Jackie Justice: overcoming childhood trauma, adversity.

SI: *How bad did you get dinged up?*

HB: Pretty bad. I mean, I was fighting Valentina, so you can imagine. We did the fight scene first, because Valentina and I had trained for a while together and we got our choreography—we knew it within an inch of our lives. So we shot the end of the film in our first four or five days. On Day 2, I got kicked and broke two ribs. And, you know, there was a moment when I thought: *We can shut this down and I can go heal, or I can keep going and just fight my way through it.* And I had to sit with myself and think. *O.K., Valentina and I have trained two years for this movie. She may never have another window. If I lose the funding now, I may never get the money again. This could all go away. And I've worked too hard.* So I thought, *I'm not going*

JOHN BAER/NETFLIX

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to tell anybody this happened. Get through the fight. And then *tell them*.

SI: *That's something a real fighter would have to go through, right?*

HB: I'm not saying that in my right mind I'd make that choice again, but you're right: I was so in that zone, in that world of being a fighter, mentally and emotionally. The fighter in me stood up and said: *You just have to keep going, take some Advil and tough your way through it.*

SI: *Your character is so sharply drawn. But I'm curious: Why do you think Lady Killer is in this game? What's she all about?*

HB: I tried to write her as the formidable champ who herself is looking to rise up. What I love about female fighters, especially, is that you can have a rivalry with someone and talk a lot of s---, but after the fight Lady Killer's character can also stand in solidarity with Jackie. She can appreciate and applaud Jackie's triumph, realizing that if she does, it doesn't diminish her own.

SI: *You'll watch Valentina's next fight?*

HB: She's my friend, so I will always be there for Valentina.

SI: *How'd you pick her for the movie?*

HB: One, she's in my weight class and I wanted to fight with my real weight class. Two, I wanted the fighter to be in the UFC. I wanted to really challenge myself, push myself as far as I could as an athlete. And as the director, I felt like having a real fighter opposite me would bring a certain reality to the movie that I know I didn't have. She did that in spades. She helped me make sure that every move we performed—every moment of the fight—was authentic.

SI: *How did personal experience inform this film?*

HB: It's personal experience, but I think it's also human experience. As human beings we all face adversity. We all are fighting for something. Many of us have dealt with abuse in some ways—whether it's sexual, emotional, physical. I don't think you find many people [for whom] one of those boxes don't get checked. There are some similarities [between Jackie and me], but more than me I think what Jackie represents is what *everybody* is fighting for. So, my idea for this film was to make all of these characters equally fractured, equally bruised, equally fighting for something—they're all looking for some kind of redemption. Does that relate to me? Of course. Because, like everyone else, I'm human. I've suffered.

SI: *What ought we read into your character's last name, Justice?*

HB: I guess you could read into it and ask: At the end of the day, does she get the justice she deserves? But that wasn't at all what we thought about. Her name was already there when I got the script. Jackie Justice just had a ring to it that made sense.

SI: *What's your favorite sports movie?*

HB: There are so many. I would have to say either the first *Rocky* or *Fight Club*. The first *Rocky*, that's my all-time favorite.

SI: *When's Jackie's next fight?*

HB: You mean in fight terms?

SI: *You take that wherever you want to take it.*

HB: I'd say Jackie's next fight was a month after her last fight. □

JOHN BAER/NETFLIX

OUTSIDE THE LENS

Berry's strength behind the camera: She knows how to talk to actors—and if you can't do that, "you are really going to struggle."

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FACES IN THE CROWD

Photograph by **DAVID A. SHERMAN**

MAYA NNAJI

Hometown: **Lakeville, Minn.**

School: **Hopkins High**

Date of Birth: **Oct. 29, 2003**

Sport: **Basketball**

2020–21 Stats: **18.8 ppg, 7.6 rpg**

WHEN MAYA NNAJI walked into a Las Vegas gym in August, everything felt surreal. She was surrounded by NBA players, some of whom she'd recently watched on TV during the playoffs, and she even got a chance to train alongside them.

The 6' 4" senior forward at Hopkins High in Minnetonka, Minn., was at Summer League primarily to support her brother, Zeke, a second-year power forward for the Nuggets. Basketball has always been a family affair for Maya, whose 14-year-old freshman sister, Josie, is already being recruited by colleges.

Maya, the No. 10 prospect in the class of 2022, committed to Arizona in May, becoming the highest-ranked signing in program history. While Zeke's success in his one season in Tucson and the Wildcats' run to the

NCAA women's championship game in 2021 were factors in her choice of school, Maya's aspiration to become a doctor played at least as much of a role in her decision. Arizona offers an accelerated medical program, allowing her to finish her degree in seven years and complete her residency while she's in the WNBA.

"To use my brain and use my skills to help other people who are less fortunate is super huge for me," Maya says. "So I want to study medicine, and then when I retire [from basketball], I'll be a doctor and I want to start my own clinic."

For now, Maya is focused on a third Class 4A state championship after taking *Star Tribune* Metro Player of the Year honors a year ago. (She won two titles alongside UConn star Paige Bueckers.) Throughout offseason workouts she has been fueled by a loss in last year's semifinals—the team's first defeat since March 2018.

"I have a big chip on my shoulder," Maya says. "I'm coming in with a hungry mentality." *—Lila Bromberg*

UPDATE

POOL SHARK

BEFORE THE Paralympic Games S11 400-meter freestyle final in August in Tokyo, Anastasia Pagonis, 17, received a message from her idol, 10-time Olympic medalist Katie Ledecky: "I'm sending you my 400 powers." Anastasia, who lost her sight at 14, then swam a 4:54:49, beating her world record by 1.67 seconds to take her first Paralympic gold.

When Anastasia was featured in Faces in the Crowd last November, she had just won two golds at the '20 World Para World Series. She had learned how to cope with depression and PTSD after going blind, aided by her coach, parents and guide dog, Radar. Before the 400 heats, Anastasia worked through a panic attack when her swimsuit tore.

Says her mom, Stacey, "To see her go across the pool like that was mindblowing." *—Corey Annan*

ELLEN PORT Sport: **Golf** Hometown: **St. Louis**

Port, 60, became the first woman to win the local Metropolitan Senior Amateur Championship, sinking a 20-foot birdie to defeat Joseph Malnech in a four-hole playoff at Sunset Country Club. A former P.E. teacher at St. Louis's John Burroughs School for 32 years, she is a seven-time USGA champion who captained the U.S. to a 2014 Curtis Cup win.

KAYLEB WAGNER Sport: **Football** Hometown: **Baker, Fla.**

Kayleb, a 6' 1", 205-pound junior running back for Baker High, rushed for 535 yards and six touchdowns in a 49–48 victory over South Walton, breaking Derrick Henry's single-game state rushing record. He gained 1,403 yards on 130 carries last season.

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TIP-OFF

Anyone's Game

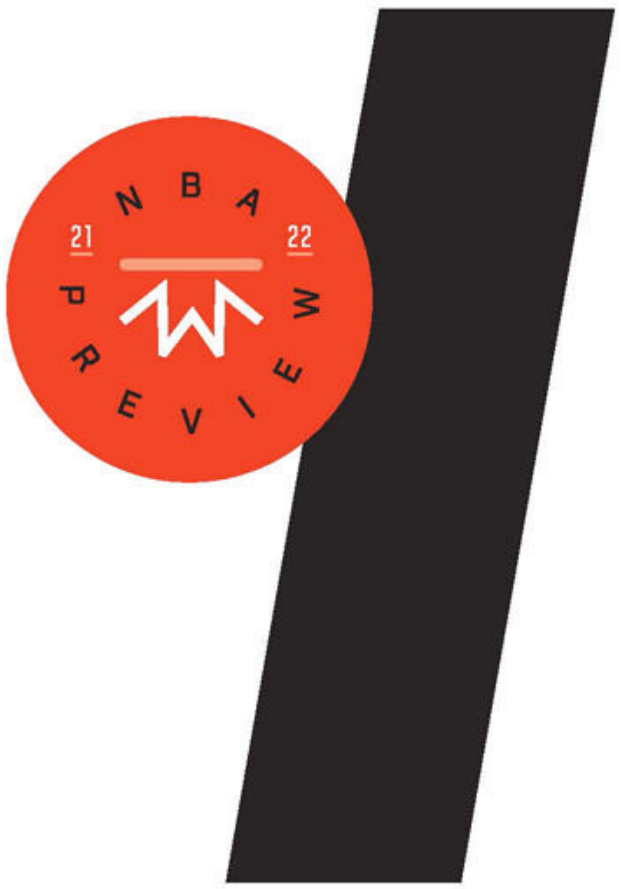
There's a potential juggernaut on each coast. But as last season's Finals, which gave us our fourth different champ in as many years, showed, ***NBA DYNASTIES*** *might be on their way to becoming a thing of the past*

NBA PREVIEW 21 22

BY **HOWARD BECK**

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

BUCKING TRADITION
Giannis Antetokounmpo led Milwaukee past Deandre Ayton and the Suns in a matchup of two franchises with a combined four previous Finals appearances in 50 years.



In the NBA, you're selling either championships or hope—so goes the modern maxim. A handful of teams have a shot at the title each season. All the others tout the promise of tomorrow: the athletic marvel they just drafted, the savvy executive they just hired, the stockpile of picks they have collected.

Sometimes, hope manifests in a more tangible, tantalizing form: a young sharpshooter's dominating in his playoff debut, silencing the league's fiercest fans, taking a bow for emphasis. An international playmaking prodigy, seizing the triple-double crown in his second season.

Hawks fans are giddy over Trae Young's sudden stardom *(page 34)*, and the potential for a decade of deep playoff runs. Mavericks fans shriek with joy at every dazzling pass and every clutch shot that flies from Luka Dončić's fingertips *(page 42)*.

By any measure, Young (age 23) and Dončić (22) are budding superstars, the kind who can without a doubt transform a franchise and define an era. You could envision a not-so-distant future when these two ethereal talents—traded for each other on draft night in 2018—will face off in the Finals, perhaps repeatedly.

But you would be wise not to bet on any of it. Not the titles, or the Finals appearances, or even the perennial postseason runs—at least not with both young stars in their present uniforms. It's not that they aren't capable. It's just that nothing is a given to last long in today's NBA.

We are living in an age of extreme volatility, when superstar wanderlust, short contracts, draconian luxury-tax penalties and a general impatience scramble the power balance on a near-annual basis. We might even be witnessing the end of the NBA dynasty as we know it.

Consider SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's Top 100 list, where nine of the top 19 players (and five of the top 10) changed jerseys at least once in the last three years.

Consider that four of the five players to win Finals MVP in the last decade (LeBron James, Kevin Durant, Kawhi Leonard, Andre Iguodala) have changed teams at least *twice*.

Consider the 76ers, a team with two young All-Stars who as recently as, um, JUNE, looked like a perennial contender, but are now seemingly in utter disarray.

Consider the Rockets, who went from West powerhouse to bottom dweller in the span of a few months last season, after James Harden and Russell Westbrook both demanded trades.

Consider the Trail Blazers, who could be one bad losing streak away from a Damian Lillard trade demand. Or the Wizards, who could be one bad season away from a Bradley Beal departure in free agency.

Consider the Pelicans, who lost their franchise star (Chris Paul) to a trade demand in 2011, lost his successor (Anthony Davis) to a trade demand in '19 and are now anxious over the simmering frustrations of their newest linchpin, Zion Williamson, who is starting his third NBA season.

Or consider this: If the Bucks fail to repeat next June—a reasonable scenario, given the specter of that microwaved superteam in Brooklyn *(page 63)*—the NBA will crown its fifth new champion in five years. That hasn't happened since 1977 to '81.

This is where we are. It's hard to land a fran-

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

chise star, even harder to get him a worthy costar and harder still to assemble, pay and retain a quality supporting cast, at least without triggering tens of millions in taxes.

Consider the Lakers *(page 71)*, who retain just *five* players from the roster that won the title 12 months ago—including two (Dwight Howard and Rajon Rondo) who left and came back in that span, and one (Talen Horton-Tucker) who didn't play in the 2020 Finals. The '19 champion Raptors were promptly kneecapped by Leonard's departure for the Clippers that same summer. The '18 Warriors were undone by injuries, sure, but also by Durant's defection to Brooklyn.

Although the 2021 champs in Milwaukee return their three top players—Giannis Antetokounmpo, Khris Middleton and Jrue Holiday—they've already lost a key starter (P.J. Tucker) to luxury-tax concerns. The tax contributed to the (arguably premature) demise of the LeBron-era Heat in '14. Tax aversion eroded the Rockets' rotation during the Harden era, breeding the discontent that later fueled his trade demand.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS
Iguodala is reteaming with Draymond Green and Curry, two of his running mates on the league's last enduring power.

And of course, it was the Thunder's aversion to the tax that spurred the trade of Harden to Houston in the first place back in 2012, when the NBA first instituted the punitive new system as part of the labor deal signed a year earlier. That's also when the league reduced contract lengths to either five years (for "Bird" free agents) or four years, giving the stars more leverage than ever.

League officials were almost gleeful about the Harden move at the time. *Player sharing* was the Orwellian term coined by then commissioner David Stern, who wanted the elite talent more evenly dispersed across 30 franchises. The 2011 labor deal didn't kill superteams, as some owners and league officials hoped, but it did make it far tougher to build and sustain them.

"Before, you would look at a seven-to-10-year window," says a longtime team executive who has worked for multiple contenders. "Now you want to maximize three to five years, as it may end or likely have dramatic change afterward."

THE NETS LOOK overpowering with Durant, Harden and Irving—though, given their ages and injury histories and eccentricities, there's no telling whether they'll win even one title, much less become a dynasty. The Lakers have shoehorned Westbrook next to James and Davis, but it cost them considerable depth, and it's an awkward fit at best—more gamble than guarantee.

The oddsmakers say we'll get a Nets-Lakers Finals next June. But would it be that shocking if we ended up with Bucks-Jazz, or Heat-Suns, or Hawks-Nuggets? The absence of a dynasty, the dispersal of talent and all the asterisks in Brooklyn and L.A. at least provide a benefit: something approximating parity. "It seems like they got their wish," salary-cap guru Larry Coon says of NBA officials. "The question becomes: *Is it better now?*"

That's today's NBA: ephemeral, inconstant, dizzying, checkered with caveats.

Even the NBA's most recent dynasty, the Warriors of 2014 to '19, was born of a once-in-a-blue-moon salary-cap spike that made the Durant acquisition possible. (Emblematic of the age, their only dynastic rival was not a franchise, but a person: James, who made nine Finals in a 10-year span, with three different teams.)

Could the reloaded Warriors, with a healthy Klay Thompson and Steph Curry playing like an MVP, regain their supremacy? Can James, who turns 37 in December, stay dominant long enough to forge a new purple-and-gold dynasty? Can the Bucks, who won their first title with an ensemble cast, raise multiple banners without a top-10 player besides Giannis?

Can any franchise keep its core together beyond a three-to-five-year window anymore? Can the promising Hawks become contenders before luxury-tax concerns start eroding the roster around Young? Can the Mavericks—having gambled (and so far lost) on their Kristaps Porziņģis investment—find a true costar for Dončić before he starts dreaming of glitzier locales?

Maybe another cap spike will come with the league's new TV deal in 2025, fueling the next Warriors-esque empire. Maybe another LeBron-like figure will emerge to dominate the landscape. Maybe some clever GM will assemble an elite cast without angering the tax gods. "Someone's going to figure it out," assures a veteran team executive.

Perhaps so. Or perhaps the NBA we see now—of peripatetic All-Stars, perpetually changing rosters and perpetually fretting GMs—is the new normal. Whether they're selling championships or hope, it all comes with an early expiration date. □

THE ENVELO

Will the odds-on favorites win? Here's how

MOST VALUABLE PLAYER

1 **GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO**
Bucks | G-F | +650

2 **LEBRON JAMES**
Lakers | G-F | +1,400

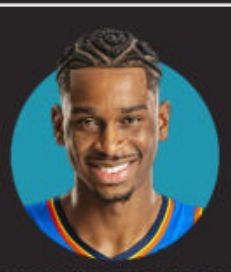
3 **KEVIN DURANT**
Nets | SF | +1,400

GOOD BET:
STEPH CURRY
Warriors | PG | +550

LONG SHOT:
ZION WILLIAMSON
Pelicans | PF | +4,000

Williamson has his work cut out for him to take home MVP honors (he's the 20th favorite), but consider this: He can stuff a box score (27.0 ppg, 7.2 rpg and 3.7 apg in just his second season), and he plays for a team that could crash the Western Conference playoff party.

MOST IMPROVED PLAYER



1 **SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER**
Thunder | PG | +1,400

2 **TERANCE MANN**
Clippers | SG | +4,000

3 **DEJOUNTE MURRAY**
Spurs | PG | +4,000

GOOD BET:
JAREN JACKSON JR.
Grizzlies | C | +1,800

LONG SHOT:
LUGUENTZ DORT
Thunder | SG | +7,000

Mann exploded for 39 points against the Jazz in the playoffs, including 25 in the second half. Don't expect that kind of output every night, but the performance showed what a dangerous threat he can be. With Kawhi Leonard out, Mann should see substantial minutes in his third season.

AWARDS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GREG NELSON; JOHN W. MCDONOUGH; MICHAEL STARGHILL/GETTY IMAGES; CHRIS SCHWEGLER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID DOW/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; CHRIS NICOLL/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; BARRY GOSSAGE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; ZACH BEEKER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

PES, PLEASE ...

the staff of The Crossover and SI Sportsbook see the major awards races

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

1 **JALEN GREEN**
Rockets | SG | +250

2 **CADE CUNNINGHAM**
Pistons | SG | +250

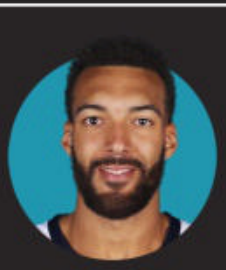
3 **JALEN SUGGS**
Magic | SG | +750

GOOD BET:
EVAN MOBLEY
Cavaliers | C | +900

LONG SHOT:
DAVION MITCHELL
Kings | PG | +2,000

Hands down the tightest race. Green and Cunningham have the same odds and split the vote among Crossover staffers. How Green's game, which was honed in the G League, translates to the NBA will be interesting, while Cunningham was easily the top NCAA player last year.

DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR



1 **RUDY GOBERT**
Jazz | C | +280

2 **ANTHONY DAVIS**
Lakers | PF | +700

3 **JOEL EMBIID**
76ers | C | +800

GOOD BET:
MYLES TURNER
Pacers | C | +800

LONG SHOT:
DEANDRE AYTON
Suns | C | +4,000

Gobert has taken the hardware three of the last four years, so it's no surprise he's the favorite. But without the versatile Ben Simmons, Embiid could have to assume an even bigger responsibility on D. That will help the three-time All-Defensive second-teamer supplant Gobert.

JUST FOR KICKS

For sneakerheads, the action is on the floor. Literally, the floor. Here are the shoes to watch this season

NIKE LEBRON 19
If these look familiar, it's because the Lakers' star went the unconventional route and gave a sneak peak of his 19th signature Nike shoe in his own movie, *Space Jam: A New Legacy*. Talk about a flex.

PUMA MB. 01
LaMelo Ball joins the likes of Ralph Sampson and fashion icon Clyde Frazier as players with their own Puma signature basketball shoes, the brand's first since reentering the basketball market in 2018.

ADIDAS TRAE YOUNG 1
Young unveiled his first signature sneaker during the playoffs. Expect to see fun colorways like SO SO DEF, a collaboration with legendary producer and Atlanta native Jermaine Dupri.
—Jarrel Harris

COURTESY OF NIKE; COURTESY OF PUMA; COURTESY OF ADIDAS

Veer and Loathing

Offensive players need to watch where they're going now that the NBA has outlawed several annoying moves

CHARITY CASE
Harden has led the NBA in free throws attempted in seven of the past nine seasons.

ON A RECENT edition of *The Crossover* podcast, NBA head of officials Monty McCutchen told host Howard Beck, "Analytics has driven efficiency. Efficiency means corner threes, layups and free throws." That's led to players using a variety of tricks to draw contact—tricks that, depending on the severity, will this year become either no-calls or offensive fouls.

So prepare to hear a lot about *abnormal launch angles*, which is what the league is calling it when a shooter kicks out a leg or extends his off arm into a defender—a dark art popularized by James Harden. Another new phrase: *overt veering situation*, also a Harden favorite, and one that Trae Young has taken to the next level. The Hawks guard, who got to the line an NBA-best 484 times last year, became so proficient at slamming on the brakes during a drive on the perimeter to draw contact that he was called out for it by New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio during Atlanta's playoff victory over the Knicks. Nets coach Steve Nash said the tactic was "not basketball."

The result, McCutchen hopes, will be a fairer, more aesthetically pleasing product. "What we want to create is [a] balance of play," he says. "We don't ever want to incentivize a non-basketball move, because we all love the game of basketball. And we want people to play the game, and not game the game." □

BIG BOARD

1 PAOLO BANCHERO
The 6' 10", 250-pound Duke freshman has a solid all-around game, with power and finesse.

2 CHET HOLMGREN
At 7 feet and 190 pounds, the Gonzaga freshman isn't built like a traditional playmaker, but he's got the chops.

3 JADEN HARDY
The G League Ignite prospect is a score-first combo guard and a potential plus defender.

4 YANNICK NSOZA
A Democratic Republic of Congo native, he's long (6' 10", 175 pounds), limber and an elite rim protector.

5 CALEB HOUSTAN
Michigan's top newcomer, the 6' 8" decision-maker doesn't require many touches to impact the game.

6 JABARI SMITH
A 6' 10", 220-pound freshman at Auburn, he has a natural stroke and a developing handle.

7 PATRICK BALDWIN
The talented forward took his talents to the mid-majors; He'll play for his dad at Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

8 JALEN DUREN
The Memphis inside threat features a mature frame (6' 10", 235 pounds) and a mature passing game.

9 AJ GRIFFIN
Duke's 6' 6", 220-pound wing relies on his strength and size, but he's also got a quality jumper.

10 JADEN IVEY
The Purdue guard (and lone soph on the list) is the son of Notre Dame women's coach Niele Ivey.

These coming attractions—the top 10 players in Jeremy Woo's latest Big Board on SI.com—should be arriving on the NBA scene around this time next year. Consider them the Next Next Level stars

FROM LEFT: ADAM GLANZMAN/GETTY IMAGES; BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

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The Future Is N

Thanks to a 2018 draft-night trade, ***TRAE YOUNG*** *and* ***LUKA DONČIĆ*** *are inextricably linked. Now they have something else in common: They're at the forefront of a group of young stars around the league who are pushing their teams to new heights*

NBA PREVIEW 21 22

TRAE BY
MICHAEL PINA

LUKA BY
MICHAEL SHAPIRO

PHOTOGRAPH BY
SCOTT CUNNINGHAM
NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

NBA PREVIEW 21 22

TRAE

Let's start near the end, which soon may be remembered as the beginning. It's late June on a Sunday night inside State Farm Arena, where the Hawks and Bucks are throwing haymakers in Game 3 of the Eastern Conference finals. More than 16,000 fans are on hand to witness what can fairly be labeled as the most significant NBA game ever played in the state of Georgia.

Nursing an 85–82 lead with a minute left in the third quarter and the series tied 1–all, Hawks point guard Trae Young—having already scored 15 points on an array of step-back threes, floaters and blow-bys in the period—finds himself pinned along the right sideline by two defenders. He tries to thread a pass to forward Solomon Hill but turns it over. Then disaster strikes. As he goes to run back on defense, Young steps on referee Sean Wright's sneaker. Young's right ankle bends. His body crumples.

"I'm like, *What the f--- happened? Nobody was under you*," Hawks forward John Collins recalls. "It was heartbreaking for us as a team."

Young came back in the fourth quarter but didn't have the explosive speed that makes him so effective. Atlanta would lose the game 113–102, then split the next two without Young.

YOUNG AND FREE
Heading into his fourth NBA season, Trae, who averaged a career-best 9.4 assists last year, is learning to trust his teammates.

This wasn't the only injury in the series—Giannis Antetokounmpo hyperextended his left knee two days later—but it was massive enough to make those involved wonder what could have been after the Hawks fell in six.

"To me it was our Finals," Atlanta center Clint Capela says. "I was like, *If we win this [series], we're gonna win*."

Young thought about the moment over the summer, but he didn't dwell on it. He speaks of the injury as if recalling what he ate for breakfast. Instead of lamenting a bad break, Young appreciates the auspiciousness of his playoff debut. "I just try and live in the moment and then if it doesn't work out, I try to re-create that moment," he says. "I'm really just focused on trying to make that next step, taking it even further and going to the Finals."

Atlanta has its top nine scorers coming back. It's the same core that, after Nate McMillan replaced Lloyd Pierce as coach on March 1, had a better record (27–11) than every team except the Nuggets and Suns. The Hawks have momentum and upside, with those top nine scorers averaging 26.8 years of age. They have defensive versatility, outside shooting and playmaking, along with length and depth at every position.

Or, as Young puts it, "We have everything."

Yet they have to navigate the superteam era with only one clear All-Star. They suddenly face pressure to win now. They have more mouths to feed than any team in the league. They seem to have time on their side, but paying everyone his market value over the next few offseasons is impractical. "It's gonna be hard for the franchise to keep everyone," guard Bogdan Bogdanović says. "And everyone knows that."

It's increasingly difficult to build and maintain a homegrown juggernaut. The ghosts of San Antonio and Golden State—the last two dynasties that followed that template—are what these Hawks will chase. In the NBA stability is elusive. But if there's one team that seems ripe to grab it, it's Atlanta.

OF ALL THE reasons to be optimistic about the Hawks' future, the most prominent is Young, their scintillating, 23-year-old torchbearer. Atlanta has 19 nationally televised games this season, nine more than a year ago, including

ERICK W. RASCO

HILL
33
HUERTER
3

its first Christmas Day broadcast since 1989.

Young's first postseason was somewhere between a mild surprise and the culmination of everything he has wanted to show off on the sport's biggest stage. In 16 games he averaged 28.8 points and 9.5 assists against three physical, imposing defenses. He silenced a ravenous Madison Square Garden crowd, then dismantled the top-seeded Sixers. In a Game 1 win over the Bucks he finished with 48 points, 11 assists and seven rebounds. It was like watching a yellow jacket take down a crash of rhinos.

"He was amazing to me; I ain't gonna lie," Hawks forward De'Andre Hunter says. "So I can't imagine what he was doing for y'all, because I see him every day."

Orchestrating most of the offense out of a pick-and-roll (the NBA's staple action, which he conducts more than any player), Young practically breezes into the paint. Sometimes his flight is interrupted by a hip or outstretched arm, but that's how he draws a ton of crucial fouls. Young, at 6' 1" and a willowy 180 pounds, led the league with 484 made free throws last season, and people around the team aren't concerned by the rule change—no drawing fouls using an "overt, abrupt or abnormal motion"—that was seemingly written for contact-seekers like Young.

Young's lobs and kickouts are devastating; his floater is the ne plus ultra of cheat-code basketball, so much so that Collins was dumbfounded by playoff opponents who didn't trap him every time he came off a screen.

His pull-up threes don't engender as much panic as Steph Curry's—he's never made more than 33.5% of them in any of his three seasons—but they still concern opponents who know Young is not afraid to take them. Statistics matter only until he drills a jumper from the logo. "You can analyze him all day long," Hawks assistant general manager Landry Fields says. "Once he steps on the court, all that kind of goes out the window a little bit."

The playoffs were part of Young's ongoing learning experience, which has revolved around the friction that lies between those distant heat checks—his average three-pointers are deeper than every other player since he was drafted—and a more balanced demeanor.

"He's got one of those fast cars," McMillan says. "You can't drive that car the same way on a sunny day as you can when it's raining and snowing out there. And he was playing fast; he was taking the same shots that he was taking in the first quarter in the fourth quarter. He wasn't adapting to conditions."

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McMillan would pull Young aside during games and ask questions—*Who has the hot hand for us? Do you know a set to call for him?*—designed to broaden his perspective. He knows Young has spent his entire career carrying teams since his days at Norman (Okla.) High. During his brief time in the NBA only five players have had a higher usage rate.

But to take that next step Young had to believe in everyone else even more than his brilliant passing suggests he already did. "It's similar to Michael Jordan when he first came into the league," McMillan says. "He started to trust his teammates. And then he started winning championships."

To McMillan, Young's decision-making improved down the stretch, but the tutorials didn't end after the Hawks were eliminated.

GREG NELSON

He would text Young during Finals games whenever Chris Paul pulled something off that could double as a teaching moment. *Did you see that?*

So far, that mentorship has translated to winning. "He knows how to control the game," Capela says. "People like to compare him to Luka [Dončić], but at the end of their careers, all we're gonna remember is who won the most. Like Kobe [Bryant] and [Allen] Iverson. Kobe won, so that's the difference right there. That's what will make [Trae] extremely special. One of the greats."

Young's size makes him a target on defense, but it's an area where he says he did "a pretty good job throughout the playoffs." He'll also need to become more comfortable off the ball as McMillan tries to exploit him as a catch-and-shoot threat.

Above all else, as the face of the franchise, Young must assume a leadership role. One of his next steps will be fusing the fearlessness he exudes on the court into a broader magnetism off it. Early last season, Young had a conversation with Fields about what he wants to become in the NBA. The concept of leadership came up. As the season went on, Fields saw Young make strides expressing himself to teammates as Atlanta's clear guiding light.

"Everyone has to be on board with that," Fields says. "And if you can let [maturity and elite skill] mingle together . . . that's the superstar that people want to play with."

> ***"You've got lobs everywhere," says Collins. "Threes flying everywhere. Dudes dunking on people. We bring* THAT ATLANTA JUICE *to the court."***

FORWARD THINKING
After securing a five-year, $125 million deal, Collins—a stretch four who hit 39.9% of his threes—has All-Star hopes.

TEAMMATES DESCRIBE YOUNG off the court as reserved and soft-spoken, tending to spend most of his time around family. But who he is during games has started to consume the organization's culture. The NBA is brimming with self-belief. The unshakable way Young puts his on display makes it uniquely transmittable—and beloved by everyone battling on the same side.

"I'm not gonna say I'm not as confident as he is; I'm just saying you can see his," small forward Cam Reddish says. "He's coming down three times in a row. 'I'm gonna let this jawn go because I'm feeling it,' like, that's confidence. And I think that rubs off on everybody. Oh, he feeling it? We *all* feeling it."

By extension, the Hawks have replaced hesitancy with swagger. "I just think everybody plays with excitement," Young says. "That's all I try to do. You see guys with smiles on their faces when they make big plays, and guys on the bench happy for one another. That's all it's about. I think that's hopefully what my teammates all like about playing with me."

Collins compares their style to a twist on the Showtime Lakers: "You've got lobs everywhere. Threes flying everywhere. Dudes shimmying. Dudes dunking on people. We bring that Atlanta juice to the court."

Key veterans such as guard Lou Williams,

forward Danilo Gallinari and even the 27-year-old Capela provide an important perspective from all their time in the league. But with so many young players, some of the Hawks' most important contributors are too young to know what they don't know. "It's like a college team mixed in with a couple foreign guys," guard Kevin Huerter says with a laugh. "Everyone's joking around on the planes. . . . It's more of a casual hangout than it is guys on their phones or in their headphones."

For now, that communal energy is a force field protecting the team from the corrosiveness of self-interest and fame. Power forward Onyeka Okongwu is 20. Reddish is 22. Young, Hunter and Huerter are 23. Collins just turned 24. Their willingness to cede minutes, touches and shots for the good of all will go a long way toward deciding how successful they can be over the next few seasons.

"It's three things in the league that I look at: I want to play, I want to make money and I want to win," incoming Hawks assistant coach Nick Van Exel says. "And it's pretty much that order with a lot of players."

During the offseason, Young received his max, five-year, $207 million contract extension, while Collins was rewarded with a five-year, $125 million deal despite seeing his individual numbers dip during the playoffs. "I'm just not a guy that just, in the best way possible, cares too much about what the f--- is going on as long as we're winning," Collins says. "I feel like you need guys like me who are willing to do that. . . . That's what needs to happen for us to make all this s--- work."

Capela just signed a two-year, $46 million extension, as well. Huerter, who had foot surgery after the season, is extension-eligible without an agreement at press time. Reddish and Hunter will be up for their own raises next summer.

Last season Kevin Durant said the Hawks had seven or eight starters on their roster. He wasn't wrong. On the eve of a campaign that will bring far more attention to Atlanta than any before it, sacrifice is being embraced out loud. "I know I'm nice," Reddish says. "So when my opportunity comes—and it came in the playoffs a little bit, y'all saw a little sneak peek—then when it's time to play my role, I'll play my role. When you start getting good at your role, then your role gets bigger. It's a process. Sometimes it's gonna be hell. But you work through that."

Reddish's best friend on the team and fellow Philadelphia native, Hunter, uses the recent Warriors as a guide; the way Klay Thompson and Draymond Green accepted fewer shots to make room for Durant was critical. But when high expectations and the pursuit of higher salaries are thrown into the mix, NBA history tells us a happy ending is anything but guaranteed.

McMillan will work to put everyone in a role that's best for the team, but "there's only so much I can do," he says. "Everybody's gonna have to sacrifice. Everybody. Will they accept that? I don't know. Kevin Huerter had a hell of a year last year, but why did he have a hell of a year? Because he had minutes. He got minutes because Cam was out. Dre was out for over half the season. [Bogdanović] was out for a number of games. Now you got all these guys coming back. [Huerter] ain't getting those minutes. And they're not gonna get those minutes."

FLIGHT SCHOOL
Young and the Hawks took off under McMillan (far right), who guided them from 11th place when he took over to the No. 5 seed.

That central tension may be amplified by another: The Hawks will in all likelihood need (at least) one more marquee name to win a championship. That player may already be under contract, whether it's Collins—who adamantly believes he's about to make his first All-Star Game—Hunter or someone else, but for now it's a critical unknown.

A consolidation trade could be in Atlanta's best interest, particularly for a star who's

intrigued by the team's success—a possibility the front office mentioned during the offseason. "I know there's rumors out there, but our focus right now is only what's in our airspace, while also being open to when that opportunity [for a trade] comes," Fields says. "We're going to entertain a lot of different paths to success."

McMillan can't worry about that, though. He starts listing players he has coached who rose to a level that was never certain or even expected: Rashard Lewis, Brandon Roy, LaMarcus Aldridge and Victor Oladipo. "When [the Pacers] traded for [Oladipo] I didn't set out to make him an All-Star," McMillan says. "It was like, *I'm gonna try to take advantage of your skill* . . . which is the same thing we're doing here with these players."

In the back corner of the gym rests the team's "competition shooting board" with records for eight different drills from last year. (Bogdanović is the clubhouse leader for seven of them, all achieved as he looked for a way to motivate himself while out with a right knee injury last season.) A giant whiteboard that has yet to be written on hangs to its side. Above midcourt McMillan, about to begin his first full season as Atlanta's coach, surveys the whole floor from his office.

Wearing a white Hawks practice T-shirt and red warmup shorts, the 57-year-old is trying to balance rosy hopes with the need to be head-down humble. "I really do approach it one day at a time," says McMillan, who signed a four-year contract in July. "I know what expectations are for us this year. But I can't prepare this team

***"I'm not gonna say I'm not as confident as he is," says Reddish of Young. "I'm just saying* YOU CAN SEE HIS."**

KEVIN D. LILES (YOUNG); JESSE D. GARRABRANT/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (MCMILLAN)

Without a second star, their chances of advancing beyond where last year ended, or even getting there again, are slim. "One is not gonna do it," McMillan says. "And Trae is one of those guys. . . . Now what we gotta do is we gotta continue to develop him. And we gotta develop two more."

IT'S SEPTEMBER AT the Hawks' practice facility. Tucked inside a quiet suburban campus about 20 minutes north of downtown, a majority of the team is already in the gym.

right now for May and June. We ain't there yet." McMillan shifts in his chair, brings his hands together and prepares to open up.

In early August he went back home to visit family in Raleigh. He had breakfast with his younger brother, Lorenzo, and they were finally able to celebrate Atlanta's playoff run and daydream about the upcoming season. Three weeks later, Lorenzo died. "I think death should teach us something, and what it taught me . . . man, we gotta live every day to the fullest, because we're not promised tomorrow," McMillan says.

"So to sit here and talk about what we're going to do in May, who knows if I'll even be here in May, you know? It's taking care of today."

It's an outlook he'll impress upon his team as often as he can. This season won't be like the last, when an early road win over the Nets prompted a huge celebration. Experienced voices around the team understand that.

"You come from being bottom of the barrel to the hunted. It's a whole different ball game," Van Exel says. "So you got 82 games where pretty much you're like the Lakers. You're like Brooklyn. There's no nights off for you."

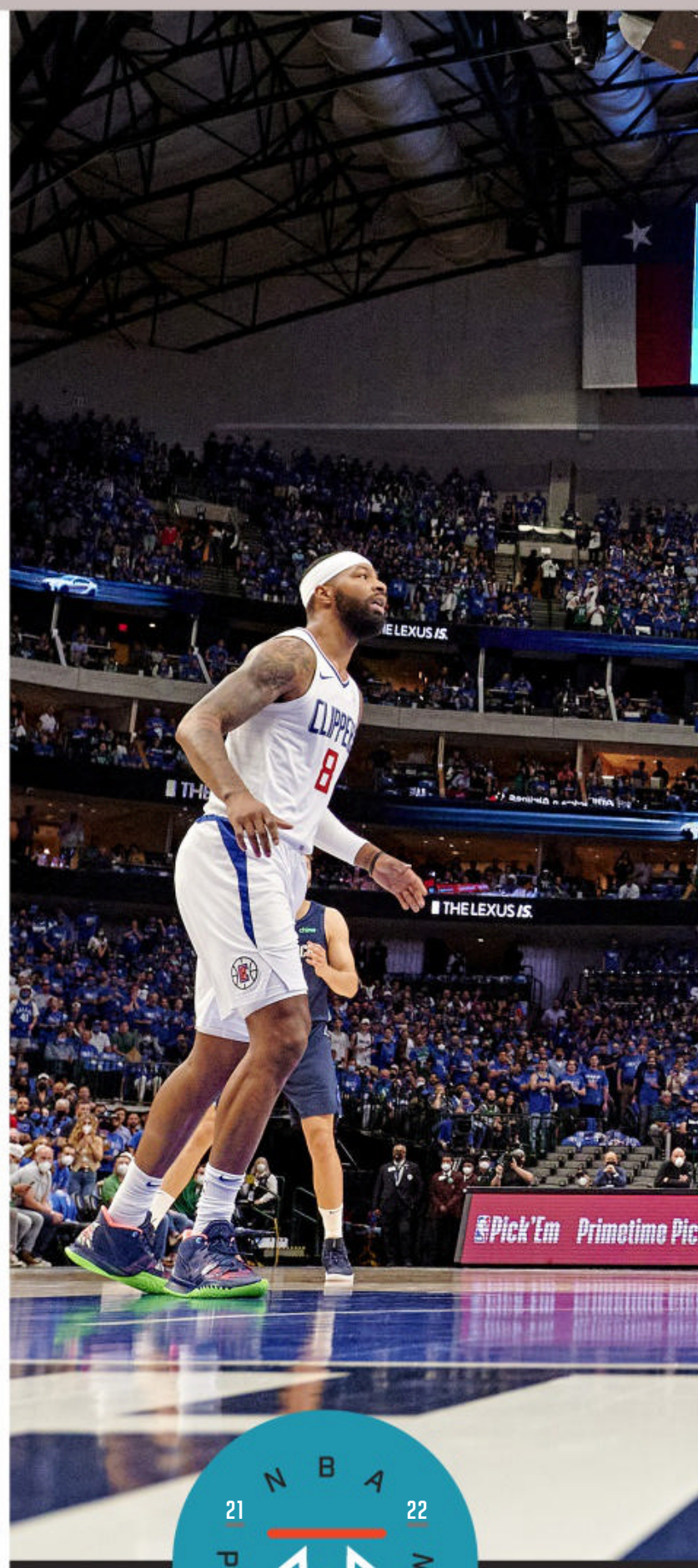
Few teams have a brighter outlook than the Hawks. With myriad options for team-building, the straightest path may be the most rewarding. If they can collectively ascend around Young, develop each season and self-deny for the sake of winning, last year's run will be seen as the start of something unrivaled in the Hawks' 54-year history in Atlanta. With all due respect to Mike Budenholzer's 60-win team of 2014–15; Mike Woodson's steady playoff march during the aughts; Steve Smith, Mookie Blaylock and Dikembe Mutombo; the spectacular show Dominique Wilkins put on in the late 1980s; Hubie Brown; or Lou Hudson's playoff battles against Jerry West's Lakers; this could be new ground since the organization moved in '68 from St. Louis (where they won a championship in '58).

"It's rare in the league for a young core to grow, and most of the time I feel like it works out when you truly let a young core grow together," Collins says. "I feel like this is the final stage of us blossoming into being a real championship team."

As Game 6 of the conference finals came to a close with the Hawks down double digits, Young started to untuck his jersey in front of Atlanta's bench. With a blank stare aimed at the court, he nodded as teammates slapped his back and spoke words of encouragement. Just before the final horn, he bent over and placed both hands on his knees. Milwaukee center Brook Lopez walked over to offer a hug before Young sauntered back to the locker room. Moments later, as he approached the tunnel one last time, Young shouted three words at State Farm Arena's lingering crowd:

"We'll be back!"

To Atlanta's franchise pillar, the statement is a byproduct of his own conviction. Which means everybody who stands behind him has no choice but to believe the exact same thing. □



SWAP MEET
Dončić made his second All-NBA team last year, an honor Young—for whom he was traded on draft night in 2018—has yet to accomplish.

NBA PREVIEW 21 22

LUK

A

The **MAVERICKS** are hoping their do-it-all franchise cornerstone can become an even better, more inclusive playmaker. So what did they do? They hired the best point guard in franchise history to be his new coach

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ***GREG NELSON***

JASON KIDD ISN'T ONE TO IGNORE THE OBVIOUS.

With seven head-coaching vacancies open over the summer, Kidd considered leaving the Lakers after his second year as an assistant. And as he mulled a potential third round as an NBA boss there was a factor that made one of the positions stand out. "Being able to have an opportunity to work with a young star like Luka, that's not something you can pass up," Kidd says. "He's super talented. He knows how to play the game; he has a drive that's unique for a player so young."

So now Kidd returns to Dallas, where he's the all-time leader in assists per game, looking to build a winner around the 6' 7" Slovenian guard who's next on that list: Luka Dončić, 22, who last year became the third player in NBA history (joining Tiny Archibald and Oscar Robertson) to average 25 points and seven assists through his first three seasons.

But it's much more than just Dončić's numbers that drew Kidd's attention. It's his flair for the dramatic, his comfort late in games, especially for players so young. Dončić buried a buzzer beater to beat the Clippers in a 2020 playoff battle, a shot that elicited maybe the most exclamatory "Bang!" of Mike Breen's broadcasting career. Last season featured an acrobatic game-winner to trip the Grizzlies in April as the Mavericks scrapped for playoff positioning and three 40-point outbursts in a seven-game, first-round loss to the Clips. "What he can do when the lights are brightest isn't normal," Kidd says. "It's special."

That brilliance hasn't been lost on his teammates. Center Dwight Powell raves about Dončić's having "eyes in the back of his head" when the two dance down the lane on pick-and-rolls, and point guard and fellow 2018 draftee Jalen Brunson is still marveling at a pass Dončić made for a corner three during their rookie year.

All of that—the production, the moxie—led the Mavs to commit $207 million to Dončić in a five-year deal that starts next season. While he acknowledges there are heightened expectations, he's also quick to appreciate what he's accomplished thus far. "My dream was only to play in the NBA at all," Dončić says. "To be in this place now, it's unbelievable."

But with a megasalary comes pressure, especially on a franchise that won just one championship during Dirk Nowitzki's 21-year run—which came in 2011, with Kidd at the point. Capitalizing on Dončić's prime is imperative. That helps explain Dallas's shift in direction. When Dončić joined a team devoid of top-line talent, the plan seemed simple: shed veterans, endure a few years of pain and return to the playoffs with a new core of Dončić and lottery picks.

Dončić's precocity upended the plan. He averaged 21.2 points, 7.8 rebounds and 6.0 assists as a rookie, slicing up opponents with step-back threes

and cross-court dimes flung with either hand. So the Mavericks made the first major alteration to their blueprint, sending three players and a pair of first-round picks to the Knicks for 7' 3" Kristaps Porziņģis.

PORZIŅĢIS IS NO stranger to Dončić's brilliance. They faced off before Luka's NBA debut, a September 2017 matchup between Slovenia and Latvia in the EuroBasket quarterfinals. Dončić poured in 27 points in a 103–97 victory. Porziņģis was no slouch himself, scoring a game-high 34, but in the final minutes, Dončić took control. He juked Porziņģis into the lane with two hard dribbles, creating a gulf of space, then calmly retreated, set his feet and nailed a triple. Then he bobbed his head in celebration while strutting past Slovenia's bench, a phenom of 18 going on 28.

"Every time I think about Luka, I think about the natural talent that he is," Porziņģis says. "The kid is unbelievable. He's always known what it takes to win."

Uniting the two seemed a coup for Dallas. Both are prodigious offensive talents who entered the NBA as relatively polished products, and their skills are complementary. In theory.

Dončić excels at orchestrating the pick-and-roll, shielding defenders on his back as he snakes his way through the paint. Porziņģis, 26, is a perfect partner for such actions, able to both rise above the rim as a roll man or tiptoe behind the three-point line, where he's a career 36.1% shooter. The partnership has shown flashes of brilliance, including a 20-game stretch to close the 2019–20 season in which Porziņģis averaged 26.3 points. The end of last year was a different story.

*"Every time I think about Luka, I think about the **NATURAL TALENT** he is," Porziņģis says. "The kid is unbelievable. He's always known what it takes to win."*

BIG D BIG SHOT
Kidd is returning to the city where he starred for parts of eight seasons, including 2010–11, when the Mavs topped the Heat in the Finals.

Porziņģis spent significant time outside the arc to stretch the defense, uninvolved as Dončić danced on the perimeter. In the last five games of the Clippers series Porziņģis scored just 58 points. He lobbed not-so-cryptic criticisms about former coach Rick Carlisle's strategy. "I was used a lot as a spacer and just shooting threes," Porziņģis said in September. "That's not my whole game. There's more to my game, more than what I can do."

Dončić realizes part of his job is to unlock those other facets. "There's a lot of things I can improve on, off the court and on the court," Dončić says. "Obviously, [involving teammates] is one of them." He noticed a difference in Porziņģis this summer. "He is in way better shape this year, especially mentally," Dončić says. "You could see him in a good mood when we were playing pickup. I think we're in for a great year together."

Creating a more egalitarian attack is a high priority for Kidd, one of the most visionary playmakers in NBA history. As a coach, he helped guide the Bucks from No. 26 in offensive rating in 2015–16 to 13th the next year, and he empowered Giannis Antetokounmpo as a lead ballhandler, trusting his vision and playmaking even as turnovers mounted for the 6' 11" unicorn.

Kidd stresses the need for each player to be engaged in the attack, a seemingly obvious point

that's often lost in today's game. Don't expect to see Dončić initiate isolation after isolation as James Harden did with the Rockets. Kidd views his leading man as more of an offensive fulcrum than a sole engine. "There's a significant stress level [Dončić] carries, and we should have ways to relieve some of that," Kidd says. "We have a good crew here and a lot of offensive talent. Kristaps can carry a team for stretches; we have other guys that can create their own shot. We should be able to get some of that stress off Luka's plate."

The X's and O's haven't proved difficult for Kidd in his previous coaching stops. He exited Brooklyn in 2014 after one tumultuous year, and when he was dismissed by the Bucks midway through his fourth season in '18, there wasn't exactly a parade of team personnel wishing him luck. He earned a reputation as being overly exacting and intense in Milwaukee, ripping off harsh critiques without raising his voice.

While Kidd won't be confused with Mr. Rogers anytime soon, he now speaks with a compassion and openness unseen at his previous stops. Kidd now views his role as "more of a collaborator" than as the leader of a team. Asked for his greatest strength, Kidd takes a long pause before a concise answer. "Today?" Kidd says. "It's listening."

Kidd dived headfirst into coaching, going from donning a Knicks jersey to coaching the Nets in 2013–14, and he didn't take a gap year before accepting the Milwaukee job. A two-season stint as an assistant under Frank Vogel with the Lakers allowed him to learn each aspect of an organization without the pressure of making final decisions, and to see the game more holistically. "Starting as a coach at the highest level, there was no handbook," Kidd says. "You think you know most of it, and you don't. Being able to communicate to your team, to your coaching staff, to management, the foundation of that is listening. That's something I learned from Frank. He's always asking his guys questions; he's always gauging the room."

He should have help in that regard from Dončić, who acknowledges the need to be more vocal. He says after being stuck in a hotel inside a bubble with his teammates at the Tokyo Olympics, where he led Slovenia to a fourth-place finish, he learned the value of spending time together. "We gotta hang out with each other more," he says.

There's also an eagerness to make his game even more well-rounded under his new coach. "It's amazing," Dončić says of playing for Kidd. "It's an opportunity for me to learn from a guy who was a champion here as a player, playing the same position as me. He was one of the best passers in the NBA, and I'm really excited about it." □

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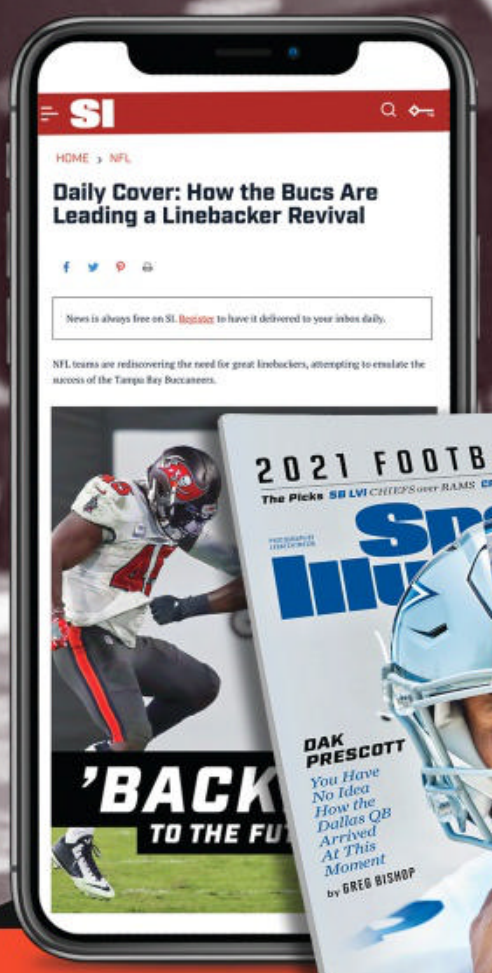
OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

Porziņģis saw his usage rate drop from 26.5% in the regular season to 16.2% in the playoffs, while Dončić's rose from 36.0% to 40.4%.

Sports Illustrated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Sea

KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS

son of Grief

After trying to find closure following a year when he lost seven family members, including his mother, to COVID-19, the ***TIMBERWOLVES STAR*** *is now ready to move forward*

BY **MICHAEL PINA**

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JEFFERY A. SALTER

On Jan. 15, Karl-Anthony Towns tested positive for COVID-19. Just nine months after the 25-year-old watched his mother, Jacqueline, die of the same disease that also killed his uncle and five other members of his family, this was a nightmare scenario.

Towns received treatment at a Minneapolis-area hospital, then quarantined at home for the next few weeks, isolated from friends and family. Basketball had been the closest thing in his life to an outlet. Now, by himself, he had no choice but to confront the pain that followed his mother's sudden death.

"I've had a lot of situations this year where things were just too much for me," Towns says. "I just remember [quarantining] in the house, and it was more than just COVID for me. I felt like I was going through a holistic journey."

On Feb. 1, Towns was cleared to join the team on a road trip that began in Cleveland. He had worked his way back after losing 50 pounds while recovering from COVID-19. "I was as big as D'Angelo [Russell]," he jokes. "I was as big as our guards. You think I'm gonna play center?"

BIG KAT
Towns dropped 50 pounds during his recovery from COVID-19, but by the end of the season he was back to his usual imposing, dunking self.

A high-calorie diet solved his weight problem. But that night inside Quicken Loans Arena, in the same building with so many people for the first time since he was able to leave his house, anxiety enveloped Towns on the bench. When the first quarter ended he texted his agent: "I can't be out here anymore. I can't do this." He rushed back to the locker room, where Minnesota's head equipment manager, Peter Warden, asked whether everything was O.K.

Towns was having symptoms of a panic attack. His chest was tight. He was sweating and having a hard time breathing. He contemplated traveling back to the hotel or even flying himself to Minnesota but stayed in the back until the game ended. It was the first time Towns had ever felt that way around a basketball court. "It was too much for me," he says. "My skin was itching."

Nine days later, Towns finally put his jersey back on for a home game against the Clippers. But to this day he can't describe exactly how his emotions allowed him to return to the floor.

Thousands have endured the death of someone they love during a pandemic that's still devastating families all over the world, but Towns had to grieve in public. An intimate agony turned communal, be it during his postgame video scrums with the media, games before and after Easter Sunday around the one-year anniversary of his mother's death or on Mother's Day on the road in Orlando. All the while, Towns tried expressing himself as honestly as he could, but his words barely scratched the surface of what roiled inside.

"I felt like everything was an open-ended sentence, you know? There was no closure. There was no period at the end," he says. "I just kept running on and running on and running on, but I never really got to where I needed to go to end a conversation."

There were days when being around teammates carried him. Basketball felt like it could provide a blip of relief. There were others when he thought about stepping away and giving himself space to mourn. "[My mother] made basketball fun for me my whole entire life," Towns says. "She made it where I wanted to even do this. So for me, I was like, *[There's] too much on my mind. I'm not, I can't, nah, I can't.*"

His father, Karl Towns Sr., told him to take his time and prioritize his own mental health, while laying out what an indefinite leave of absence would mean for his son. KAT decided to keep playing, but made it clear financial ramifications

DAVID SHERMAN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

weren't a concern. "That money s--- don't mean s--- to me," he says. "Time is the real thing we losing every day. I just really didn't think I could play the game of basketball the way I want to represent myself in the NBA. There'd be a lot of times we'd play a game. Game's over. And I'm not even in there. I'm doing my own thing. I'm in the bathroom looking at myself, wondering if this is the man that I really think I am. I had 40. I'm still not happy with the man I see in the mirror. I'm still dealing with a lot of s---."

Towns, who has remained largely silent on the subject until now, says that during the season there was no opportunity to process his own heartache. So much energy was spent worrying about others, and he didn't want to let anybody down, not the fans or his teammates or his coaches. But the desire to put everybody else's feelings before his own split him in half. He still gets emotional describing the weight last year placed on his shoulders, ultimately admitting: "I never got a chance to really sit down and say, 'Hey, Karl, what do you need?' "

BEFORE HOME GAMES last season, Towns would walk into coach Chris Finch's office with a latte in his hand, sit down and chat. Most conversations covered their shared Philadelphia Eagles obsession or baseball, specifically the AL East standings. "We'd just talk about these little commonalities that we've had that give us a chance to shoot the s---, so to speak," Finch says.

In getting to know each other, Towns and Finch, who was hired midway through the season, would also discuss different ways they could take advantage of his singular skill set, be it specific plays Tom Thibodeau used to call when he was Minnesota's coach or broader opportunities to run the offense through him. Finch recalls Towns's highlighting one play from his rookie season during a victory over the 73-win Warriors where he glued himself to Steph Curry. Says Finch, "He's like, 'I can guard this guy! I can guard that guy!' " Finch later looked up Towns's numbers switching screens and was impressed. "There's not anything on the floor he doesn't think he can do, which is what you want from your best player."

But since Towns was voted as the No. 1 player NBA general managers would most want to build a team around before the 2016–17 and '17–18 seasons his career has lost some propulsion. Towns hasn't won a playoff series during his six NBA seasons. His first and only postseason appearance came three years ago, on the back of a combustible partnership with Jimmy Butler

and Thibodeau, which eventually led to the hiring of Gersson Rosas as Minnesota's president of basketball operations.

"I expected to be in a much different situation," Towns says. "After my third year with us making it to the playoffs—having that experience, knowing what it takes, knowing what to listen to, knowing who not to listen to, I had a good grasp on what the young guys needed to hear—I was hoping we would take that playoff run and build a culture around it. But things have changed a lot in Minnesota. Every year. So it's hard. It's been hard to build a culture with young guys and everything, when everything's not static."

(Not even three weeks after Towns said this, Rosas was abruptly terminated after it was reported he had an extramarital affair with a coworker. He was replaced by executive vice president of basketball operations Sachin Gupta.)

As best he could, through sadness and physical injuries, Towns tried turning things around last season; even in a losing environment, there were clear traces of the revolutionary big man who helped change the league when he entered it.

Towns brought the ball up and kick-started sets like a point guard. He came off screens. He posted up. He popped for threes. He initiated dribble handoffs from the elbow and was the pick-and-roll ballhandler. "When you have skilled bigs you can kind of flip the court on people," Finch says. "We want him to have as many early touches in the offense as possible, not just to feed himself, but his passing skills are elite. I was fortunate enough to work with [Nikola] Jokić. Their skill sets are so, so, so similar."

It's easy to take Towns's repertoire for granted, watching a center mow down opponents with the instincts and fluidity of a guard. He thinks some have: "Don't get it twisted. [Jokić] is definitely amazing when it comes to passing, and his teammates know where he's at. The system they have, it's almost perfectly tailored for him. And obviously it has to be if you're gonna win MVP. But I've been doing that my whole career."

There might not be 10 players alive who can single-handedly mangle a defensive scheme in all the ways he does, some of which have yet to be explored. "There's a lot of things I work on in the offseason that we never utilize, and one day we're going to utilize it and you're gonna say, 'Damn, he could do that?' And I'm gonna be like, 'F--- yeah! I've been doing this s---!' " Towns says, laughing. "There's a lot of my game out here I haven't shown. . . . And if I get a chance, s--- is gonna get real spooky and scary for people."

Towns is one of 17 players in NBA history—the only active player—to record at least 9,000 points, 4,000 rebounds and 1,200 assists in the first six seasons of their career. In the 85 games he played over the past two seasons, Towns launched seven threes per game and drilled 39.9% of them. That gravity is one reason why the Timberwolves have always, in every year of his career, had an elite attack when he plays and have been significantly less efficient when he's not in the game.

"I believe he's a top-five talent in the league," Finch says. "He's got to be able to stay healthy, and we've gotta be able to continue to surround him with the right supporting cast."

The Wolves ended last season 23–49, 13th in the West, despite having the same net rating as the Heat with Towns on the floor. But when he considers his future in basketball, there's still excitement in his voice. While navigating the most difficult time of his life, Towns hasn't lost sight of everything he wants to accomplish in a sport he's still determined to dominate.

WHEN THE SEASON first ended, Towns says he was lost, lamenting, among other things, an overseas family vacation he had planned before his mother died. "We were gonna do a big world tour," Towns says. "We hadn't done a family vacation since I was in the second grade."

So Towns spent the summer trying to work on himself. To self-interrogate. To let his anguish

PERMANENT MEMORY
Towns honored Jackie with a tattoo of the date she died and a Bible verse, while the T-Wolves honored her with flowers and a jersey.

FROM LEFT: BRIAN PETERSON/STAR TRIBUNE/GETTY IMAGES; BRUCE KLUCKHOHN/USA TODAY SPORTS; JEFFERY A. SALTER

ebb and flow and run its course. He found himself searching for the right balance again, this time between self-care and assuming some of the responsibilities his mother held, which included being present for his grandmother, his aunts and his sister's children.

Then there were stretches where he just wanted to stay inside and do nothing except work out. He'd glance at a clock and realize it was midnight and he hadn't eaten anything all day.

But the offseason also provided some space to breathe. He didn't have to worry about on-court performance or leading one of the youngest rosters in the league. His nightly pressures were replaced by the freedom to relax. Talks with his father and close friends helped. Towns leaned on his faith and went on trips with his girlfriend, Jordyn Woods. In Bora Bora, she would spot him on the beach, either head down in prayer or face up, talking to the sky.

In early June, Rosas and Finch flew to Los Angeles and had dinner with Towns at Craig's in West Hollywood. At a casual meeting that lasted about 90 minutes, they sat on the back patio, outside a packed dining room that, on that night, included Elton John. Over honey truffle chicken and calamari, they watched Game 6 between the Lakers and Suns, where Towns's close friend Devin Booker dropped 47 points. It doubled as a reminder that some of Towns's contemporaries were passing him by. They didn't discuss making a Finals run overnight but were inspired by the Suns' turnaround.

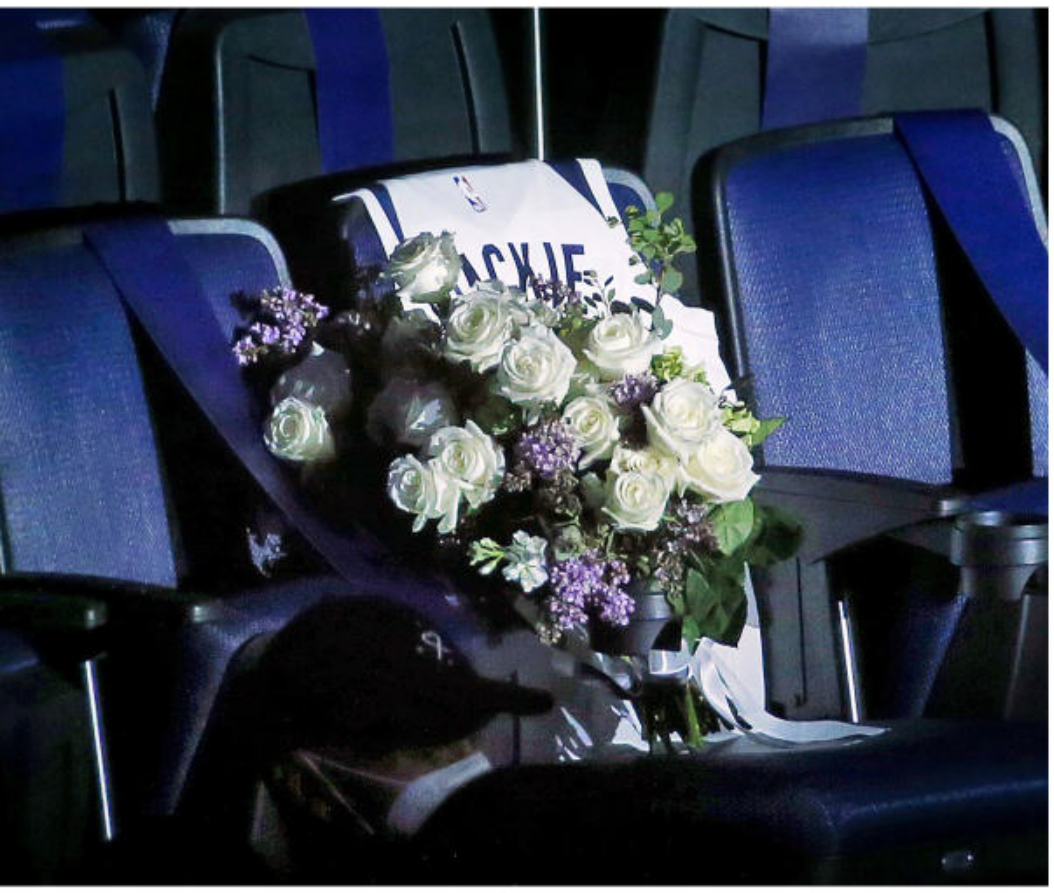
"Do you know how many times I've heard jokes about Phoenix? And then all of a sudden, boom, all together they said, *You know what? We're gonna stop the bulls---. We're gonna come together and give everything to winning. No stats. No money. Just winning.* And they went to the Finals," Towns says. "So it's a mentality. And it starts early."

If the Timberwolves are ever going to turn things around and make the playoffs, let alone flex some muscles once they arrive, it'll be with a more balanced roster. Patrick Beverley and Taurean Prince were acquired during the offseason for that reason, but finding ways to keep Towns engaged, albeit out of foul trouble (he led the NBA in fouls in 2018 and '19), when the team doesn't have the ball will be critical. Minnesota is tied for last in defensive rating since Towns was drafted.

"We gotta create a pick-and-roll scheme that helps him out and protects him in the best possible way," Finch says. "And we gotta be able to protect the paint as a team, at the point of attack as a shell defense. And that's going to help Karl out a lot. And I don't think [our] defensive struggles are Karl's alone or have been Karl's alone."

Entering his seventh season, Towns faces somewhat of an inflection point. "I think what's really on the line is people's perception of Minnesota. Of me," he says. "I'm for sure not gonna fail. So I got to do what I got to do, but the

"[My mother] made basketball fun for me my whole entire life," Towns says. "So [when she died], I was like, [There's] TOO MUCH ON MY MIND. I'm not, I can't, nah, I can't."



pressure is high for me to win, and rightfully so."

Towns spent parts of the summer working out in L.A. with assistant coach Kevin Hanson and at the Proactive Sports Performance facility in Westlake Village. After he didn't miss a single game in his first three seasons, he was derailed over the past two by injuries that included a sprained knee and a left wrist that's been fractured and dislocated. His primary focus is to compete in all 82 again. Towns believes he's in the best physical shape of his life.

One byproduct of that would be his reestablishing himself among the best centers in the league, after a season in which Jokić and Joel Embiid finished first and second for MVP, respectively. Looking at that debate, he believes championships will have a louder say in any discussion than anything else. "None of them won an NBA Finals, so all of us haven't really accomplished anything," Towns says. "We all chasing that title, that ring. That's really what's gonna set all of us apart. So that's what I'm focused on. That's what I've been focused on."

With three years left on his current contract, Towns would qualify for a supermax extension next summer by making an All-NBA team this year, a mutually beneficial possibility that would erase the stress of his looming free agency.

Towns has publicly committed to the Timberwolves several times, most recently at the end of the 2020–21 season, when he told reporters he wanted to have a career like Tim Duncan and Kobe Bryant, spending it all with one team. According to someone close to Towns, nothing related to that goal was altered in any meaningful way by Rosas's dismissal. A contract extension is already on his radar.

"My chips are all on the table," Towns says. "So it's up to the Wolves, you know? If they give me the chance to stay there I fa' sho would take it. The ball is in their court."

WHEN JACKIE TOWNS died on April 13, 2020, it changed her son forever. He says he doesn't smile as much, doesn't feel young the same way he did a couple of years ago. "I'm a totally different person," he says. But life is also mapped by benchmarks that help signify change, and he's starting to recognize the unforeseen blessings it can bring.

In February 2020, Towns fractured his left wrist. Not playing was hard, but the injury allowed him to leave the team and attend his niece's birthday party, something he'd never been able to do. That party was the last time he saw his mom outside of a hospital. They talked and hugged. "I have a lot of memories of my mom that I hold very tight to me. And pictures that I would have never gotten if I wasn't hurt," he says.

"I'm a spiritual man. It's kind of ironic how all that worked out. Like I was being prepared for something."

Grief's calendar is too unpredictable to let opening night of the 2021–22 NBA season be the exact moment Towns comes through on the other side of a dark period, fully healed. But time can be a passage to normalcy, and sometime over the last few months Towns noticed that his grief was starting to shrink as the strength to carry it began to swell. "I think I've grown as a person," he says. "I had no choice. I think that I'm stepping into a new evolution of mine. Into a new evolution of me."

ALEX GOODLETT/GETTY IMAGES

LONG HAUL
After leading the team in scoring and rebounding and setting a career high in assists (4.5 apg), Towns expressed a desire to stay in Minnesota.

In early September, Towns was sitting next to Woods when he made a spontaneous announcement: "I was like, 'You know what? I'm ready.' "

She had no idea what he was talking about, but Towns continued on.

" 'If we had to start today. I'm more than prepared. I'm mentally prepared to go to Minnesota, live in Minnesota, play this game.' I've been working tremendously hard this offseason, not only my body but just working on me."

Towns pauses, looking for the words he's spent the past 18 months trying to find. "I think I found some comfort in where my life is right now." □

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Right now, most clinical information is not regularly shared with the researchers who are trying to uncover new information about cancer every day, **but you can help change that.** Patients can help accelerate research **by sharing their data and unique experiences.**

When patients stand together with researchers, they can unlock new discoveries and treatments. People with all types of cancer may be eligible to **join Stand Up To Cancer, Count Me In and more than 7,500 patients who have already participated in this mission** to accelerate the pace of cancer research.

Find out more and sign up to join the movement at StandUpToCancer.org/CountMeIn

Uzo Aduba
Stand Up To Cancer Ambassador

Photo By
Matt Sayles

STAND UP TO CANCER

Count Me In

Stand Up To Cancer is a division of the Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF), a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

SCOUTI

REPORTS

LAST YEAR, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THREE SEASONS, GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO WAS NOT NAMED MVP. HE DID, HOWEVER, WIN HIS FIRST NBA TITLE—A TREND LAST YEAR'S MVP, NIKOLA JOKIĆ, WOULD LOVE TO SEE CONTINUE. BUT EACH BIG MAN HAS A SUPERTEAM STANDING IN HIS WAY

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JAMIE SCHWABEROW

NOT JOKING AROUND

The soon-to-be MVP (15) had work to do when the Freak missed from the line in a February matchup, which the champs won 125–112.

NBA PREVIEW 21 22

EASTERN CONFERENCE

1	Bucks	6	Celtics	11	Wizards
2	Nets	7	Pacers	12	Hornets
3	76ers	8	Knicks	13	Pistons
4	Heat	9	Bulls	14	Cavaliers
5	Hawks	10	Raptors	15	Magic

CONFERENCE FINALS
NETS over BUCKS

WESTERN CONFERENCE

1	Jazz	6	Mavericks	11	Timberwolves
2	Lakers	7	Clippers	12	Kings
3	Suns	8	Trail Blazers	13	Spurs
4	Nuggets	9	Grizzlies	14	Rockets
5	Warriors	10	Pelicans	15	Thunder

CONFERENCE FINALS
LAKERS over NUGGETS

NBA FINALS

LAKERS over NETS

LEBRECHT MEDIA (TROPHY)

Eastern Confer

After a ho-hum offseason, the champs are largely intact, but will they have enough talent to hang

INTRIGUING

ENGAGING BULLS

Chicago had the most polarizing offseason of any team east of Los Angeles. Will the additions of guards DeMar DeRozan, Lonzo Ball and Alex Caruso be enough to fight for home court in the first round, or will it be a fifth straight lottery for the Bulls? Kudos to the front office for trying something bold—and for providing a mystery for fans to follow throughout the year.

BAD

NO MAGIC HERE

Outside of forward Jonathan Isaac *(above)* and rookie Jalen Suggs, Orlando offers relatively little in terms of excitement or promise. And considering Isaac is coming off a torn left ACL that limited him to 34 games the past two seasons and Suggs can't be expected to carry a team, hopes aren't exactly high. The Magic's most intriguing games will see them jockeying for lottery position.

GRINDING IN THE GARDEN

Nearly every Tom Thibodeau team has a baseline level of regular-season success. And while the Knicks are more talented than his team last season—which snapped the franchise's seven-year postseason drought thanks to a star turn from power forward Julius Randle *(above)*—they will still be winning games mostly on the strength of a brutish defense and a gritty style of basketball that's not particularly appealing for those who aren't diehards.

HUMDRUM

FROM LEFT: FERNANDO MEDINA/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; ROCKY WIDNER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; ERICK W. RASCO (2)

ence

with the loaded Nets?

NBA PREVIEW 21 22

OH, BROTHER!

Joel Embiid *(below)* is an MVP-level talent worth the price of admission alone. Mix in high expectations, last year's success and the fallout of the Ben Simmons saga, and the 76ers are a combination of talent and drama. One way or another, this season will be memorable.

GOOD

DEER PRUDENCE

Giannis Antetokounmpo *(below)* will certainly bring his brilliance, but the Bucks have been piling up wins in the regular season for years now. The real juiciness comes when NBA Twitter is dissecting Mike Budenholzer's rotations in a seven-game series.

SOUTHEAST

1 MIAMI HEAT
IN› PG Kyle Lowry, PF P.J. Tucker
OUT› PG Goran Dragić, SF Trevor Ariza

2 ATLANTA HAWKS
IN› PG Delon Wright, C Gorgui Dieng
OUT› PG Kris Dunn, SG Tony Snell

3 WASHINGTON WIZARDS
IN› PG Spencer Dinwiddie, SF Kyle Kuzma
OUT› PG Russell Westbrook, C Robin Lopez

4 CHARLOTTE HORNETS
IN› C Mason Plumlee, SF Kelly Oubre Jr.
OUT› C Cody Zeller, PG Devonte' Graham

5 ORLANDO MAGIC
IN› PG Jalen Suggs (R), C Robin Lopez
OUT› SG Dwayne Bacon

CENTRAL

1 MILWAUKEE BUCKS
IN› PG George Hill, SG Grayson Allen
OUT› PF P.J. Tucker

2 INDIANA PACERS
IN› SF Torrey Craig, SG Chris Duarte (R)
OUT› PF Doug McDermott, PG Aaron Holiday

3 CHICAGO BULLS
IN› SG DeMar DeRozan, PG Lonzo Ball
OUT› PF Thaddeus Young, PF Lauri Markkanen

4 DETROIT PISTONS
IN› PG Cade Cunningham (R), C Luka Garza (R)
OUT› C Mason Plumlee, SG Wayne Ellington

5 CLEVELAND CAVALIERS
IN› PG Ricky Rubio, PF Lauri Markkanen
OUT› PF Larry Nance Jr., PF Taurean Prince

ATLANTIC

1 BROOKLYN NETS
IN› PF Paul Millsap, PG Patty Mills
OUT› PF Jeff Green, SG Landry Shamet

2 PHILADELPHIA 76ERS
IN› C Andre Drummond, PF Georges Niang
OUT› PG George Hill, C Dwight Howard

3 BOSTON CELTICS
IN› PG Dennis Schröder, C Al Horford
OUT› PG Kemba Walker, SG Evan Fournier

4 NEW YORK KNICKS
IN› PG Kemba Walker, SG Evan Fournier
OUT› PG Elfrid Payton, SF Reggie Bullock

5 TORONTO RAPTORS
IN› PG Goran Dragić, SF Scottie Barnes (R)
OUT› PG Kyle Lowry, SF DeAndre' Bembry

SI Sportsbook's over/under win totals (and our projection)

1 HEAT
48.5 (OVER)

2 HAWKS
46.5 (OVER)

3 WIZARDS
34.5 (OVER)

4 HORNETS
38.5 (UNDER)

5 MAGIC
22.5 (UNDER)

Southeast

ENEMY LINES

AN OPPOSING SCOUT SIZES UP THE DIVISION

LAMELO BALL IS a star. He's Jason Kidd with a better jump shot. He's among the best passers in the NBA already. He showed leadership last season that I didn't expect—the Hornets fell apart when he went out. He's going to have to adapt to being at the top of every scouting report. . . . [Rookie point guard] Jalen Suggs looked like the real deal in Summer League, but can the Magic play him next to Markelle Fultz? I don't know how you look at them and see anything but one of the worst teams in the NBA. . . . Everybody is excited about Kyle Lowry [going to Miami], but is he that big of an upgrade over Goran Dragić? Dragić could score, and he had great chemistry with that team. Lowry is a leader, but he takes a lot of contact, a lot of charges. I worry about injuries. . . . There aren't many guys I'd want to have the ball in key situations more than Jimmy Butler. He needs to be more of a playmaker with this group, because they don't have a lot of shot creators. . . . I like the direction of the Wizards. Spencer Dinwiddie is a better fit alongside Bradley Beal than Russell Westbrook was. And they've done a nice job collecting pieces, all with potential. Kyle Kuzma didn't like his role in L.A. but he'll have a bigger one in D.C. . . . The Hawks' biggest offseason addition really is [a healthy] De'Andre Hunter. He might have been their best player in the first third of the season. He's one of the best defenders in the league.

IMPROVEMENT IN WINNING PERCENTAGE FOR THE HAWKS IN 38 GAMES UNDER NATE MCMILLAN (.711), WHO TOOK OVER FROM LLOYD PIERCE (.412).

TELLING NUMBER

.299

NEXT LEVEL

Bam Adebayo

By next season, Adebayo could very well be the best player on a Heat team that includes champion Kyle Lowry and Finals hero Jimmy Butler. Defensively, Adebayo was seemingly engineered in a lab for the modern NBA. At 6' 9" and 255 pounds, he is equally adept at switching onto guards on the perimeter, banging with bulky bigs on the block and protecting the rim. (Just ask Jayson Tatum about that last one.) Offensively, Adebayo is like Grand Central Terminal—everything can run through him. He's a smooth operator at the elbow, initiating handoff sets, running inverted pick-and-rolls and driving past slower defenders.

Next up: moving his game out of the paint. Adebayo hit 42.4% of midrange shots and just 2 of 8 threes, and he needs to be both more aggressive and efficient from the perimeter as opponents dare him to launch.

—Rohan Nadkarni

ISSAC BALDIZON/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

SI Sportsbook's over/under win totals (and our projection)

1 BUCKS
55.5 (OVER)

2 PACERS
43.5 (OVER)

3 BULLS
42.5 (UNDER)

4 PISTONS
24.5 (OVER)

5 CAVALIERS
27.5 (UNDER)

Central

ENEMY LINES

AN OPPOSING SCOUT SIZES UP THE DIVISION

THE BUCKS NEEDED Giannis Antetokounmpo to deliver against really good teams, and he did. But free throw shooting and jump shooting obviously are things that he can add to his game. They don't need a true point guard because they've got Giannis and Khris Middleton, who's a strong ballhandler and playmaker. . . . The Bulls improved offensively, but defensively they're going to be pretty bad. DeMar DeRozan's still good at the end of games. Now the Bulls have him and Zach LaVine. But who's going to lead the charge? LaVine's a top-level scorer, but he's not a leader. . . . Collin Sexton is a backup. None of his teammates in Cleveland like him. Darius Garland plays hard, and he puts pressure on you because he can shoot, he can pass and he's not trying to get his stats and go home, like Sexton. I don't think they can play those two small guards together. . . . Everyone I've ever talked to who played for [new Pacers coach] Rick Carlisle has been rubbed the wrong way. But he runs good stuff and puts guys in position to be successful offensively. I would imagine he's going to try to get as much shooting on the floor as he can. . . . [Pistons center] Isaiah Stewart—I love that f------ kid. His work habits are spectacular. He's a great team guy. But Jerami Grant was one of the most overrated players last year. He had that really good start when Blake Griffin and Derrick Rose were there. Once teams started to concentrate on him, his numbers went down.

THE BUCKS' RANKING IN SCORING DEFENSE (114.2 PPG), THE WORST BY AN NBA CHAMPION SINCE THE 2001 LAKERS.

TELLING NUMBER

22

ERICK W. RASCO

NEXT LEVEL

Domantas Sabonis

Two forwards averaged 20 points, 10 rebounds and six assists last season. One (the Knicks' Julius Randle) was named All-NBA. The other was the 6' 11" Sabonis, who, toiling in a small market for the profoundly disappointing Pacers, got no such acclaim.

Sabonis's scoring and assist averages have increased in each of his five seasons. Last year he was close to automatic around the basket (74.7% on shots at the rim), a top defensive rebounder (9.5 per game) and a triple-double threat (nine). His playmaking conjures memories of his father, Arvydas, one of the best passing centers of all time. Yet Arvydas was also a long-range threat, which brings us to the biggest hole in Domantas's offensive game: He's a career 32.1% shooter from deep.

While Sabonis lacks the length to be a shot blocker, or the athleticism to be a plus defender, few power players can match his offensive skills—which are enough to keep Indiana relevant in an increasingly competitive East.

—Howard Beck

SI Sportsbook's over/under win totals (and our projection)

1 NETS
56.5 (UNDER)

2 76ERS
50.5 (OVER)

3 CELTICS
46.5 (UNDER)

4 KNICKS
42.5 (OVER)

5 RAPTORS
36.5 (OVER)

Atlantic

ENEMY LINES

AN OPPOSING SCOUT SIZES UP THE DIVISION

I DEFINITELY THINK Julius Randle's production last season is sustainable, because he's an elite worker. The three-point shooting [41.1%] is the one area where he might regress. The Knicks' offense was exposed in the playoffs, when they had to lean on Derrick Rose. That's why they added two more ballhandlers [Evan Fournier and Kemba Walker]. . . . With the Nets, it just comes down to health. Kevin Durant looked like he never left, man. He's unbelievable. I think he's the greatest player in the world. . . . With Blake Griffin, LaMarcus Aldridge and Paul Millsap, I'm sure they're just going to use the regular season to see which five-man lineups work best together. . . . Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown have both gotten better every year—as wings and defenders. But it always felt like the Celtics had a core group of six or seven guys, and now, bringing [35-year-old] Al Horford back, it's like they're in scramble mode. . . . Tyrese Maxey could get an opportunity in Philadelphia. I know they're excited about his ceiling. I think he's going to be a rotation player in the playoffs that you can count on. . . . The scouting report on [Toronto's] Pascal Siakam is to make him shoot. He was hesitant at times to take those shots. He's a downhill attacker, and you just try to take charges on him. In pick-and-rolls, he's not the greatest passer. If he gets off to another rough start, I could see the Raptors trying to send him somewhere.

CAREER GAME 7 LOSSES FOR 76ERS COACH DOC RIVERS; NO OTHER COACH HAS MORE THAN FIVE.

TELLING NUMBER

9

NEXT LEVEL

Jaylen Brown

There's no way to know whether Brown can handle the responsibility of being a No. 1 option on a team that enters each season earnestly trying to win a championship. In his five years with the Celtics he has never had that role, and, as long as Jayson Tatum is around, it's unlikely he ever will. But after watching Brown last season, it's easy to convince yourself that he could do it.

With every ingredient for greatness—height, length, instinct, explosiveness and unshakable self-belief on both ends of the floor—the 6' 6" wing rode one of the NBA's most confident jump shots to his first All-Star Game. Brown more than doubled his assist average, to 3.4, and was ninth in three-point accuracy (37.1%) among those with at least seven attempts per game. Plus, he capably defended four positions.

Even though he isn't his team's primary option, Brown's value is knocking on the door of priceless.

—Michael Pina

EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES

Fully Loaded

Now that Kevin Durant is healthy and secure, the Nets are making it really hard to find reasons to be skeptical of their chances

KEVIN DURANT, NO stranger to tough questions, settled into a chair at Nets media day in September to face a roomful of reporters with few of them. *His health?* Any lingering doubts about Durant's once-injured right Achilles dissolved in a 40-minute-per-game playoff performance last spring. *His future?* Durant killed any speculation on that in August, signing a four-year, $198 million extension with the Nets through 2025–26. These days Durant is just an ordinary, run-of-the-mill MVP front-runner—on a team with the best odds to win a championship.

Skeptical of Brooklyn? You have to *really* want to be. After missing all of 2019–20, Durant averaged 27.0 points in 35 games last season. Kyrie Irving had the most productive season of his 10-year career, with an offensive rating of 121. James Harden, a volume scorer over eight-plus seasons in Houston, slipped seamlessly into a lead playmaker role. Injuries limited the trio to just 202 minutes together, but in that time they were dynamic, running up a 119.6 offensive rating—higher than the NBA-best 118.2 Brooklyn posted overall.

There's reason to believe they can be even better. Take Harden, who sulked through a few weeks in Houston before being shipped to

BY **CHRIS MANNIX**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ERICK W. RASCO**

TRIMMED BEARD
Harden, who missed a career-high 28 games, put up his lowest scoring average since 2012.

Brooklyn last January. His numbers with the Nets—24.6 points and 10.9 assists per game—were good. But he was out of shape and, by his own admission, unfocused. "I kind of blame last year on myself because I'm usually prepared, physically and mentally," he says. "Last year was just draining [with] all the stuff that was going on. I didn't have the right mindset and preparation for an entire season. Usually I'm very durable and I'm able to handle anything that comes my way, for the most part. This year, from top to bottom I feel totally different."

There's depth in Brooklyn. Good depth. There's Patty Mills, the versatile combo guard who signed a two-year, $12 million deal after playing the last 10 seasons in San Antonio. There's swingman Joe Harris, who led the NBA in three-point percentage (47.5%) for the second time in the last three years. There's Bruce Brown, a 6' 4", 202-pound guard whose ability to defend a range of positions landed him a prominent role in the rotation last season.

There's LaMarcus Aldridge, who joined the team in March after being released by the Spurs. During an April game against the Lakers, Aldridge—who had been diagnosed with Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome, an abnormality that can cause an irregular heartbeat, in 2007—felt palpitations. Within days, he retired.

Aldridge returned to Texas, where he underwent a battery of tests. "Just so I could return to everyday life," says Aldridge. The results were good. He took more tests. More good results. He began thinking: *Maybe I can come back*. He called Brooklyn GM Sean Marks. Marks listened—and then tried to talk Aldridge out of it. "I wasn't ready to stop," says the 36-year-old power forward. "I was helping the best team in the NBA. I was having fun. I still love the game. I still bring something to the table."

Aldridge will play a leading role in a formidable frontcourt. Blake Griffin, signed midway through last season, returns. At 32 he revived his career as a small-ball center in Brooklyn, connecting on 38.3% of his threes. Paul Millsap, a four-time All-Star, arrives from Denver, replacing Jeff Green, who had jumped to the Nuggets. Millsap will battle Nic Claxton and James Johnson for playing time.

"This team is not going to need me to go out there, go to work on the block and score 15, 20 points," says Millsap. "I understand that, and knowing my role on this team is going to be big and crucial. Everybody knowing their role on the team is going to be crucial."

"I kind of ***BLAME LAST YEAR ON MYSELF*** *because I'm usually prepared physically and mentally," says Harden. "[It] was just draining."*

NO SWEAT
In his first season as a coach, Nash led the Nets to their best winning percentage (.667) since they joined the NBA.

POTENTIAL OBSTACLES LOOK more like mere bumps. There's Irving, always a wild card. His uncertain vaccination status—New York City requires proof of vaccination to even set foot in indoor entertainment venues, including Barclays Center—ginned up some controversy early in training camp. But Irving thrived playing off the ball with Harden, freeing him to be more scorer than playmaker.

Defensively the Nets finished in the bottom third of the league last season, though team officials point to a postseason stinginess—fourth among the 16 playoff teams in defensive rating—coupled with the return of Aldridge and the continued development of the 6' 11" Claxton as reasons to be bullish. "We were really good in the playoffs," says coach Steve Nash. "Numerically, the eye test and even getting more granular, we did a lot of things well when you consider our health at that stage of the season. We've got to build on that and pick up as close to where we left off as possible."

If they do, who's going to stop them? If Durant's foot had been an inch back in the closing seconds of Game 7 of the conference semifinals against Milwaukee, then the Nets—without Irving and with Harden hobbled—would have sent the Bucks home. At 33 and in his 15th season in the league, Durant is peaking.

Durant shrugs at those who wondered whether he would be the same player after the Achilles tear. "I was expecting to do the things that I did," he says. He enters the season in shape after a three-week, gold-medal-winning—some might say *salvaging*—stint with Team USA in Tokyo. He's energized by the return of Aldridge, a close friend whom he convinced to join Brooklyn.

"He [retired] 49 points away from 20,000," says Durant. "I want him to get that." He sees the potential in a team that won't have to spend months learning one another. "Everybody is more comfortable in this environment," says Durant. "The IQ is pretty high with this group. It's just a matter of us getting reps in. We're looking forward to that. We have a lot of boxes checked. Once we get on the court, that's the final one." □

Western Confe

The upstart Suns were the best in the West last year, but all eyes will be on the loaded Lakers

INTRIGUING

GRIN AND BEAR IT

Memphis is still a year away from being a bona fide playoff threat. Even with a thrilling floor leader in Ja Morant and a full season of Jaren Jackson Jr., who played just 11 games last year recovering from a left knee injury, the Grizzlies remain among all the other postseason hopefuls in the second tier of the West. They're just sort of . . . there, in the middle of things.

BAD

THUNDER STUCK

At 23, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander *(above)* is blossoming into one of the best playmakers in the league, but he's not exactly surrounded by elite, win-now talent. With asset-amassing Oklahoma City, the real fun won't come until draft night next summer, when GM Sam Presti will make every single pick (or at least it'll seem that way).

TEXAS BACK STEP

How the mighty have fallen. Once the owner of a 22-year playoff streak, the Spurs are now headed the opposite way, having missed the postseason two years in a row. It's hard to see that trend ending in 2022, as San Antonio is bereft of the All-Star talent it was long used to having. How the Spurs find a new leading man and whether Gregg Popovich *(left)* will ever get to coach a relevant team again are two of the biggest questions in the NBA.

HUMDRUM

CLOCKWISE FROM

rence

and the resurgent Warriors

RUNNING IT BACK

The Warriors were widely hated when Kevin Durant supercharged their dynasty, but he's long gone and suddenly it's like it's 2015–16 again, as the core of that lovable 73-win team—Stephen Curry *(above)*, Klay Thompson, Draymond Green and Andre Iguodala—is back in place. Now if they can only stay healthy.

GOOD

JAZZ STANDARDS

Utah's style of play is conducive to winning, yet Rudy Gobert *(left)* & Co. still need to prove that gaudy regular-season win totals can translate to playoff success. Utah has won a total of three second-round games since 2017 and hasn't made a conference final since '07. That matters more than the seed the Jazz get.

LEFT: GREG NELSON; JOE MURPHY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; BRAD MANGIN; NILS NILSEN; JEFF HAYNES/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

SOUTHWEST

1 DALLAS MAVERICKS
IN › SF Reggie Bullock
OUT › SG Josh Richardson, PF Nicolò Melli

2 MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES
IN › C Steven Adams
OUT › C Jonas Valančiūnas, SF Justise Winslow

3 NEW ORLEANS PELICANS
IN › C Jonas Valančiūnas, PG Devonte' Graham
OUT › PG Lonzo Ball, C Steven Adams

4 SAN ANTONIO SPURS
IN › SF Doug McDermott, PF Thaddeus Young
OUT › SG DeMar DeRozan, PG Patty Mills

5 HOUSTON ROCKETS
IN › PF Daniel Theis, SG Jalen Green (R)
OUT › PF Kelly Olynyk, SG Sterling Brown

NORTHWEST

1 UTAH JAZZ
IN › PF Rudy Gay, C Hassan Whiteside
OUT › C Derrick Favors, PF Georges Niang

2 DENVER NUGGETS
IN › PF Jeff Green
OUT › PF Paul Millsap, C JaVale McGee

3 PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS
IN › PF Larry Nance Jr., SG Ben McLemore
OUT › SF Derrick Jones Jr., PF Carmelo Anthony

4 MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES
IN › PG Patrick Beverley, SF Taurean Prince
OUT › PG Ricky Rubio, PF Juancho Hernangómez

5 OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER
IN › C Derrick Favors, SG Josh Giddey (R)
OUT › C Al Horford, SG Svi Mykhailiuk

PACIFIC

1 LOS ANGELES LAKERS
IN › PG Russell Westbrook, SG Wayne Ellington
OUT › SF Kyle Kuzma, PG Dennis Schröder

2 PHOENIX SUNS
IN › SG Landry Shamet, PG Elfrid Payton
OUT › SF Torrey Craig, PG Jevon Carter

3 GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS
IN › SF Otto Porter Jr., SG Andre Iguodala
OUT › SF Kelly Oubre Jr., SF Kent Bazemore

4 LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS
IN › PG Eric Bledsoe, SF Justise Winslow
OUT › PG Patrick Beverley, PG Rajon Rondo

5 SACRAMENTO KINGS
IN › C Tristan Thompson, PG Davion Mitchell (R)
OUT › PG Delon Wright, C Hassan Whiteside

SI Sportsbook's over/under win totals (and our projection)

1 MAVERICKS
48.5 (UNDER)

2 GRIZZLIES
41.5 (OVER)

3 PELICANS
39.5 (UNDER)

4 SPURS
29.5 (OVER)

5 ROCKETS
27.5 (UNDER)

Southwest

ENEMY LINES

AN OPPOSING SCOUT SIZES UP THE DIVISION

LUKA DONČIĆ AND Kristaps Porziņģis complement each other perfectly. A pick-and-pop big who can roll some and has a guard skill set—that's really textbook for a guy to play with Dončić. What the Mavericks are missing is another playmaker, another creator. That is their biggest weakness. . . . The Grizzlies continue to trend upward slowly. They play hard every night. I'm a big fan of Jaren Jackson. I think he's a modern big. How he plays is going to be the key for them in taking the next step. . . . Zion Williamson had a stretch there when you could argue he was the MVP. His strength and speed, the combination of it, there is no one like him. He's going to get to the rim and there's really not much you can do about it. He generates fouls and he puts constant pressure on the defense. . . . Saying that, the Pelicans had a tough time finishing games. I think they have more question marks than any other team. Jrue Holiday's a perfect player for them—and they traded him. . . . Christian Wood had a good season on a bad [Rockets] team. Whatever. Can he do that in a winning environment? I'm not a big fan of Kevin Porter Jr. While I understand the talents, to me he is just another guy who can put up numbers on bad teams. . . . Everyone just likes thinking about the old Spurs teams, but they haven't been really good recently. They have some decent players, but where do they go? What direction is it? I don't know.

SEASONS (INCLUDING THE LAST TWO) IN WHICH THE SPURS MISSED THE PLAYOFFS SINCE JOINING THE NBA IN 1976.

TELLING NUMBER

6

NEXT LEVEL

Ja Morant

Somehow, Morant, standing 6' 3" and charitably listed at 174 pounds, enters his third season as one of the most ferocious dunkers in the NBA. While the diminutive Morant will never get mistaken for LeBron James, both can make a defender duck in fear on their way to the rim.

Morant isn't just a posterizer, of course. The No. 2 pick in the 2019 draft made a smooth adjustment as a floor general, and he continues to grow as a creative passer both in transition and in the half court, slinging dimes to open shooters with either hand. Morant's greatest strength is his ability to slice through traffic inside the arc: Only four point guards attempted more shots at the rim last year.

If Morant can be more effective from beyond the arc in 2021–22 (30.3% last season, down from 33.5% as a rookie), an All-Star appearance and a second playoff berth will be on his horizon.

—Michael Shapiro

JOE MURPHY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

SI Sportsbook's over/under win totals (and our projection)

1 JAZZ
52.5 (OVER)

2 NUGGETS
48.5 (OVER)

3 TRAIL BLAZERS
44.5 (UNDER)

4 TIMBERWOLVES
35.5 (OVER)

5 THUNDER
23.5 (UNDER)

Northwest

ENEMY LINES

AN OPPOSING SCOUT SIZES UP THE DIVISION

I CAN SEE the Jazz being the No. 1 seed again. A big question: Can Rudy Gobert stay on the floor in the playoffs? He couldn't against the Clippers. He is going to have to prove he can against smaller lineups. But he's such an elite defender and rim protector that you just live with his weaknesses. With more teams playing big again, Gobert is going to see his value rise. . . . Losing Jerami Grant hurt the Nuggets, and they went into scramble mode, trying to get a wing similar to him. I didn't love the Aaron Gordon trade. He's not going to be the five, because Nikola Jokić is the five. You could play him as a small-ball four, but he's not a great defender. He doesn't do anything great for me. . . . I'm a fan of the Damian Lillard–CJ McCollum backcourt. The Trail Blazers' struggles say more about the guys around them. You need size around them, with [the 6' 3"] McCollum at the two. You need defenders, shooters, guys really, really set in their roles. And Jusuf Nurkić, he's been inconsistent. Zach Collins, they missed on that pick. They've missed a lot on guys. . . . The talent with D'Angelo Russell is there. I just don't see the impact. He can put up numbers. For a guy you're paying that type of money, you expect to count on him every night. He's not proved that in Minnesota. . . . I'm a huge fan of [OKC's] Shai Gilgeous-Alexander. He's as good a young point guard as we have in the NBA. His pace is great. He's an improved shooter. He's special.

TRIPLE DOUBLES FOR NIKOLA JOKIĆ LAST YEAR; THE ONLY CENTER WITH MORE IN A SEASON IS WILT CHAMBERLAIN.

TELLING NUMBER

16

NEXT LEVEL

Donovan Mitchell

It's simplistic to blame Mitchell for the Jazz's early playoff exit: In the second-round loss to the Clippers, he averaged 34.8 points. But Utah's stumble had critics (see O'Neal, Shaquille) saying Mitchell can't be an alpha on a title team. Here's what the 25-year-old Mitchell is: an elite scorer. He poured in a career-best 26.4 points per game last season, connecting on 38.6% of his threes. He can also erupt at critical moments: His 45 points in Game 1 against the Clippers tied him with Karl Malone for the most 40-point playoff games in team history (four, in 160 fewer games).

Here's what Mitchell isn't: efficient. He connected on just 43.8% of his shots, struggling in the paint (41%) and from midrange (43.4%).

For Utah, a high seed in the conference is a lock. A deep postseason run? That will hinge on Mitchell's continued development.

—Chris Mannix

GREG NELSON

SI Sportsbook's over/under win totals (and our projection)

1 LAKERS
53.5 (UNDER)

2 SUNS
51.5 (OVER)

3 WARRIORS
48.5 (UNDER)

4 CLIPPERS
46.5 (OVER)

5 KINGS
36.5 (UNDER)

Pacific

ENEMY LINES

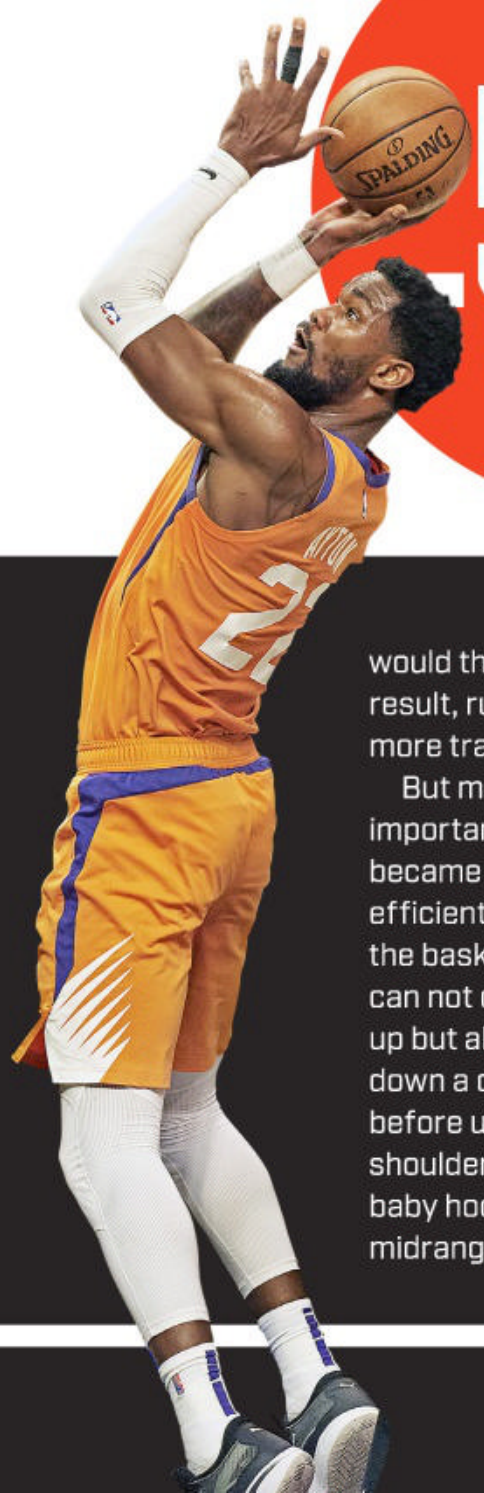
AN OPPOSING SCOUT SIZES UP THE DIVISION

THE LAKERS ARE swinging for the fences. Russell Westbrook is a boom-or-bust deal. The argument for it would be you get as much star power as you can, then you figure out the rest. LeBron clearly wanted Westbrook. I would've rather had Buddy Hield. . . . The thing I thought that was underrated with the Suns was they won a lot of games at the end of the third quarter and the beginning of the fourth because they had guys who could score a little, and then they surrounded them with guys who could shoot and defend. . . . Chris Paul plays to his strengths about as well as any guy in the league. In the Finals, the Bucks pressured the s--- out of him and wore him down. I thought that was a really good strategy. . . . Andrew Wiggins took a step forward, turned into a pretty good defender, but offensively he is not high-level. Draymond Green needs shooting around him. If he doesn't have it, he's a guy that you do not have to guard on the perimeter at all. . . . I love De'Aaron Fox's talent. But he doesn't bring it every night. The big question for the Kings is, are they going to have the worst defense in history?. . . . With Kawhi Leonard out [with a torn ACL], the Clippers will still be a good shooting team, but where will they get some of their playmaking? Reggie Jackson is not that; Luke Kennard is not that. Eric Bledsoe can be a good fifth starter, and he can guard on the ball when he wants to, but he doesn't do it all the time.

CLIPPERS' WINNING PERCENTAGE WITHOUT THE INJURED KAWHI LEONARD; THEY ARE .677 WHEN HE PLAYS.

TELLING NUMBER

.535



NEXT LEVEL

Deandre Ayton

The ascent of Ayton in his third season was one of the biggest keys to the Suns' surprise Finals run. Among his improvements: the ability to hit defenders with physical picks and the foresight to flip screens on the fly, which confused would-be stoppers while making life even easier for Chris Paul. It was a good development for a player who, earlier in his career, often slipped those same screens to get open faster—even if it meant his pick-and-roll partner would then, as a result, run into more traffic.

But most important: Ayton became far more efficient around the basket. He can not only face up but also back down a defender before using either shoulder for a baby hook. The midrange J (40%) could still use a bit of work, as could the three-point stroke (4-of-20), but Ayton had periods during the postseason when he was dominant, shooting 79.6% in Round 1 against the Lakers. With consistency as a shooter, his value will only increase.

—Chris Herring

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

Going All In

Already a title contender with two superstars, the Lakers added a third in the mercurial Russell Westbrook, plus a slew of new fill-ins. Will that gamble pay off?

IT'S THE BIGGEST question. It's perhaps the only question: *Why?* It was just last October when the Lakers were celebrating their 17th NBA championship. If Anthony Davis hadn't tweaked his groin in Game 4 of Los Angeles's first-round series against the Suns this spring, maybe the Lakers would've dispatched the battered Nuggets and Clippers en route to the Finals. That's not just possible. It's *probable*.

So why would L.A., with the bones of a title team, shuttle in 10 new bodies, including one of the NBA's most polarizing stars? Why would a franchise with seemingly so few roster questions construct an aging one loaded with them? Rob Pelinka pauses to consider the question. "One of the things that gets lost when putting together a roster is that while talent is the most important thing, we are operating in a system, within a collective bargaining agreement, that has taxes and penalties," says the Lakers' general manager. "The job of every basketball exec is to thread that needle."

BY **CHRIS MANNIX**

CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES

There's part of the answer. It explains the loss of Alex Caruso, a key reserve guard who signed a four-year, $37 million deal with the Bulls after the Lakers decided keeping him would push them too far into luxury-tax territory. It explains why Dennis Schröder, who rejected a four-year, $84 million extension last season, signed a one-year contract with the Celtics in the offseason after that longer deal had been taken off the table. It doesn't explain why Pelinka shipped what was left of L.A.'s trade assets—including 26-year-old forward Kyle Kuzma and last June's first-round pick—to Washington for Russell Westbrook.

LeBron James has operated as the de facto point guard the last two seasons; in 2019–20 he led the NBA with 10.2 assists per game. Pelinka envisions Westbrook as someone who will take playmaking pressure off LeBron while creating easy opportunities for Davis. James, Pelinka notes, has won titles with strong lead guards. In Miami, it was Dwyane Wade; in Cleveland, it was Kyrie Irving. Westbrook, still a blur in transition at 32, should jump-start the attack (the Lakers were 16th in pace). To help with rebounding, the Lakers brought back Dwight Howard, a key reserve on the 2020 championship team, and signed DeAndre Jordan. "We were a great running team two years ago," says coach Frank Vogel. "We took a step back last year. I think [Westbrook is] going to get us back to being one of the best."

Westbrook arrives with baggage. He remains a stat stuffer—22.2 points, 11.5 rebounds and 11.7 assists last season, the fourth time he has averaged a triple double. But the Lakers will be his fourth team in as many years; the Rockets and Wizards each offloaded him after one year. He has the second-highest usage rate in NBA history (32.5%, trailing only Michael Jordan's 33.2%) and he joins a team with two players (James and Davis) who ranked in the top 25 last season. Pelinka, however, says he has seen an evolution in Westbrook's game in recent years. "He plays with more empathy now," says Pelinka. "Sometimes young, athletic guys, they see things with blinders on. I think he has opened up his lens."

Vogel believes Westbrook's season in Houston—where he paired with James Harden, another ball-dominant player—will make it easier for him to blend with James and Davis: "He's willing to do whatever we ask him to do to help this team win a championship. It's the only thing that matters to him. He's not concerned with anything else."

The key to the Lakers' success in the Westbrook era will be spacing. Davis connected on only 26.0% of his threes last season and Westbrook 31.5%. So Pelinka binge-signed deep threats: guards Wayne Ellington (42.2% from three last season for the Pistons) and Malik Monk (40.1% for the Hornets), and swingman Kent Bazemore (40.8% for the Warriors). Point guard Kendrick Nunn flashed the ability to create his own shot over two seasons with the Heat, while the Lakers hope playing off James and Westbrook will squeeze a few more catch-and-shoot jumpers out of Carmelo Anthony. Internally, L.A. is bullish on Talen Horton-Tucker, the rising third-year guard who signed a three-year, $32 million contract this offseason. "There's nothing Talen doesn't have to keep him from being an elite player," says Pelinka. Vogel plans to use more small lineups, with Davis at center, to get more shooting on the floor. "We got away from that last year," says Vogel. "He'll play more in the middle. You might see some centerless lineups, too. We have the type of team where we can really open the floor up."

JOHN BIEVER

But will the Lakers still be able to defend? They had the NBA's top-ranked D last season. Davis returns as the centerpiece, but L.A. lost two key perimeter defenders in Caruso and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, as well as Kuzma. Vogel has challenged Horton-Tucker to play a more significant role defensively, and the Lakers will bank on some combination of Bazemore, Monk and veteran forward Trevor Ariza to force opposing perimeter threats to settle for jump shots and keep them from feasting in the paint. "These guys are going to have to learn each other," says Vogel. "We're going to have to build the chemistry necessary to win and get everybody on the same page."

The Lakers still have James, who, in his 19th season and two months from his 37th birthday, remains one of the league's top players. Anticipating a more up-tempo offense this season, he reported to camp leaner than in years past. He has a close relationship with Westbrook—James and Davis "enthusiastically" endorsed the trade, says Pelinka—and has posted photos of the two working out together in the offseason. Westbrook's "competitive spirit," says Vogel, will give the roster a new energy. "I think the question is, *What is the collective mindset of this team going to be?*" says Pelinka. "Are we going to come to the table with some sense of sacrifice? If a star player wants to play by himself, be the only All-Star, put up crazy numbers on a mediocre team, fine. Maybe that's satisfactory to some. To these guys it's not."

"[Russ] plays with MORE EMPATHY NOW," says Pelinka. "I think he has opened up his lens."

Indeed. James, a magnet for motivation, has found some in the criticism of the Lakers' roster overhaul. "I don't think this will work," James sarcastically posted below a picture of him in the gym with Westbrook. He has noted the criticisms of the older roster. He says the Lakers have "recalibrated" after a four-month offseason, which followed a historically short 71-day break after exiting the NBA bubble a year ago. "The great ones, they enjoy being counted out or being doubted," says Vogel. "And I think he hears the whispers about those things with our team." Two years ago the Lakers came to camp with a new star—Davis—and a revamped roster. That team won a championship. This group faces comparable challenges. L.A. hopes the results are the same. □

SCOTT CUNNINGHAM/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

GOLD STARS
James (below, right) and Westbrook are no strangers: They led the U.S. to victory in the 2012 Olympics (opposite).

INVERTED

PYRAMID

COLLEGE PREVIEW 21 22

For ages, coaches ruled college hoops.
But at Memphis,
PENNY HARDAWAY
and his star recruits,
JALEN DUREN *and* ***EMONI BATES,***
have turned that world upside down

BY **MICHAEL ROSENBERG**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **TAYLOR BALLANTYNE**

MEMPHIS
TIGERS
Memphis
ELEIKO
45
25

COLLEGE PREVIEW 21 22

The coach who is trying to win a national title and launch the next men's college basketball powerhouse has a message for his peers:

"THE PLAYERS DICTATE EVERYTHING. THE COACH HAS NO POWER ANYMORE."

Penny Hardaway says this without hesitation or bitterness, which explains, as much as anything, why his Memphis program is ascendant. To many coaches, college basketball has been flipped upside down. Hardaway thinks it is now right side up.

Hardaway has never coached an NCAA tournament game, yet he is leading college basketball's team of the moment. This is how fast the sport has moved lately: Eighteen months ago, his two best players, projected future NBA lottery picks Emoni Bates and Jalen Duren, were high school sophomores in Ypsilanti, Mich., and Philadelphia, respectively. Bates was the most-hyped prospect of his generation, yet he says the two recruiting titans of this age, Duke and Kentucky, never offered him a scholarship, figuring he would follow other recent stars to the NBA G League or some other pro outfit before entering the NBA. Then the Supreme Court ruled that college players could cash in on name, image and likeness. After transferring to private high schools, Duren and Bates each graduated a year early and immediately became top-five prospects in their new class. Now they live next door to each other in a dorm, like typical college students, but they're each free to make hundreds of thousands of dollars this year off their fame.

Talk to Bates and Duren now, and you wonder: Did Hardaway score the recruiting coup of the year when they signed—or did they?

Bates and Duren so dictated the terms of engagement that it was like the *players* offered the coach a chance to sign with *them*. They were not really high school students picking a college. They were not even high school stars picking a college program. They were future NBA millionaires who decided to play together, then defined the environment they wanted and chose the place that would provide it. History, conference affiliation, national profile, recent success—these factors did not drive their decisions. Hardaway says their recruiting was like modern NBA free agency, where players choose the roster, coach and system that can advance their careers.

Duren confirms: "That's exactly as we viewed it."

He says their reasons for choosing Memphis are "all right in front of you." Hardaway, a former NBA All-Star point guard, can tutor Bates on how to play the position. One of Hardaway's assistants, Larry Brown, is one of the best teaching coaches in history. Another, former All-Star Rasheed Wallace, can teach Duren about playing power forward. Bates and Duren join a team that won the NIT and returns three of its top-five scorers—a seemingly ideal supporting cast.

From Adolph Rupp to John Wooden to Dean Smith to John Thompson to Mike Krzyzewski, men's college basketball was built by coaches with an aura—men who had complete control of their programs and were idolized for it. If Hardaway

TIGER BATES Seeking better competition, Emoni left his high school in Michigan for a charter program started by his dad.

JUNFU HAN/DETROIT FREE PRESS/USA TODAY NETWORK

M P H

succeeds them, it will be partly because he recognizes the job description has changed.

"You're the guy, but you got to give a lot," he says. "You can't go in there pounding your fist. You'll never make it."

IT HAPPENED, LIKE so many life-changing moments, in a Waffle House.

Bates and Duren had taken different paths to the same emotional place. Bates was a rare basketball prodigy. Hardaway, a former two-time first-team All-NBA player who once defeated Michael Jordan's Bulls in a playoff series, says, "The first time I saw Emoni was probably sixth grade. I was like, *Wow, this kid is gonna be special*. He really reminded me of Kevin Durant." In sixth grade, the only part of Duren's game that reminded anybody of Durant was his name. James Johns, his AAU coach with the Philadelphia-based Team Final, jokes that when Duren was 11 "he couldn't walk and chew gum at the same time."

Duren's coordination eventually caught up with his body, and he developed into a 6' 10" Marvel character—a strong, athletic freak with a soft touch whom Hardaway says is "almost like a reincarnation of Chris Webber." By earlier this year, as they considered their playing options, he and Bates were on the cusp of achieving their dreams, but before they could get there, they were already worn out.

DUREN DUREN
Like his future Tiger-mate, Jalen was head and shoulders above other high schoolers; refs were equally confounded by what to do with him.

MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES

Bates was on the cover of SPORTS ILLUSTRATED at the beginning of his sophomore year at Ypsilanti Lincoln High, and he was touted across the media landscape as basketball's next generational talent. He had everything you could want in the game, except peers—and maybe some more bulk. Overmatched high school opponents tried to abuse his thin frame. Largely because he sought better competition, he left Lincoln after his sophomore year for a pop-up school, Ypsi Prep, that his father, E.J., founded. But on both that team and with Bates Fundamentals, the AAU squad his dad also ran, Emoni had to carry teammates who could not match his talent or drive. He started forcing shots and got visibly frustrated on the court. For the first time in Bates's life, people started questioning how good he was and whether he put his team first. Some analysts wondered whether he was really the best player in his class.

Of his doubters, Bates, now 17, says, "That's people that don't know the game." Still, he needed a change, and so he joined Duren on Team Final and went to South Carolina for the recruiting circuit's marquee event, the Nike EYBL Peach Jam. Johns could see that the pressure of living up to their billing was getting to both of them. On a day off he arranged for breakfast with them at a Waffle House. The trio was joined by Bates's father and another team assistant coach. As they talked, the players found comfort in knowing they faced similar emotional challenges. Then they walked out and found basketball brotherhood.

Bates was already over trying to score 50 every game. At 6' 9", he wanted to be a point guard. Johns tested Bates by bringing him off the bench in his first game with Team Final, to see whether he would complain. He didn't. Then Bates went into the game, and Johns had to pull him aside: *You're being* too *unselfish*.

"People have the worst perception," says Johns, now an assistant at Division I Fairfield, in Connecticut. "He is the most unbelievable, unselfish kid. I was shocked."

Like Bates, Duren had outgrown his competition, but in different ways: He was so big and strong that nobody knew how to officiate him.

"I don't want to sound crazy when I say this, but they kind of pushed him out of high school," Johns says. "There are times he is penalized for playing hard. Now he has to take his foot off the gas, and he is frustrated."

With Bates's sharing the attention and feeding him in transition, Duren seemed transformed. They won the title at Peach Jam. Bates, who had verbally committed to Michigan State in June 2020, started seriously talking to Duren about playing college ball together. They just needed to find a coach willing to replicate what they had already built and then improve on it.

SIX YEARS BEFORE Jalen Duren and Emoni Bates were born, Penny Hardaway got his coach fired. The player insurrection that forced the Magic to ax Brian Hill damaged Hardaway's reputation, but it also presaged the current era of player empowerment. Hardaway believed that coaches should see their players as partners, instead of employees. He still does.

He says even now, when he sees an NBA player battling with his franchise, "I always view everything as a player first, coach second. I've been in those situations." This means that when he talks to a player, he doesn't have to stop and remind himself: There are feelings at stake. He understands, instinctively, that the line between player and coach isn't as thick as it used to be. His players call him Coach P or Coach Penny, not Coach Hardaway. (One, guard Jayden Hardaway, still calls him "Dad," even during practice.)

"Back in the day, your coach was everything, especially in high school and in college—like your father figure," Hardaway says. "Now it's almost like business partners. It used to be, *I gave you your scholarship. You listen to what I say, and you'll be quiet.* In today's world, it doesn't work that way."

Hardaway, 50, remembers being paddled by coaches growing up: "That was a universal thing around Memphis. Like, if you had bad grades, if you were doing things in school that were not satisfactory to the coach, the parents gave the O.K.: You can discipline him." Now he wonders how much a coach can even yell at his players.

Hardaway did not work his way up through the college ranks as an assistant. He led middle school, high school and AAU teams instead. It gave him an understanding of the current teenage star's mindset.

Today he runs a developmental basketball program, not a fiefdom. Hardaway says that when Bates first reached out and asked him to teach him how to play point guard, earlier this year, "I was like: 'O.K., if you go professional, then come down in the summers.' " Young pros often come to the Memphis campus in the summer to work out, even if they never attended the school. Then Bates clarified: He wanted Memphis to recruit him, to play with Duren, whom Hardaway had already been courting.

> *"Now it's almost like you're business partners," **HARDAWAY** says. "It used to be, I gave you your scholarship. You listen to what I say, and you'll be quiet."*

Bates and Duren are like Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving when they decided to go to Brooklyn together. Or LeBron James's taking his own program to a new city. "That's what he did in Miami," Hardaway says. "That's what he did in L.A."

And you're comfortable with these guys doing that in Memphis?

"Yeah, because I know we can help them. It's a mutual deal. We see your talent. We understand that you're great. And we can help mold that greatness."

Many of the old reasons that elite players chose schools no longer apply. They don't need more exposure—Bates has more than 400,000 Instagram followers already. They don't need to prove themselves against the best competition—they have already faced future NBA lottery picks many times in AAU and with USA Basketball, and NBA scouts have seen them do it.

For decades, the best recruiting coaches had to figure out who would sway the decision. The mother? The father? The grandmother? The AAU coach? Sweet-talk that person (or pay them under the table), and the star would come. But Bates and Duren are connected to people who already know

TIM NWACHUKWU/GETTY IMAGES

Change Is Good

How does a struggling blueblood program reenergize after a rough year? Step one: Hit the transfer switch

ANYONE seen college basketball's bluebloods lately? Save for UCLA's unexpected Final Four run, nearly all the traditional men's hoops powers finished last season on a downswing. Kansas and North Carolina suffered grisly early-round losses. Indiana missed the NCAA and the NIT. The NCAA tournament went on without both Duke and Kentucky for the first time since 1976. Even UCLA's success seemed like an anomaly: The Bruins had to win a play-in game as a No. 11 seed to simply crack the field of 64.

The most powerful change agent in sports is embarrassment—and no matter how storied your program, there's always a breaking point. Adapt to the times or face the consequences. For many traditional powers this season, the NCAA's transfer rules, which have grown increasingly lax over the last decade, provided the fastest route to improvement. The proof of concept was the Final Four. National champion Baylor had two seniors, four juniors and two sophomores in the rotation; four of them were transfers. Four of Houston's starters were transfers. UCLA's leading scorer, Johnny Juzang *(left)*, transferred from Kentucky, and Gonzaga's top assist man, Andrew Nembhard, transferred from Florida. The value of experienced talent was obvious as the stakes rose last spring.

Kentucky's John Calipari was once among the most vocal critics of the shifting transfer system, but the coach went all in after the Wildcats went 9–16, their first losing campaign since 1988–89. Six of Kentucky's 14 players this season are transfers—guard Kellan Grady (a career2,000-point scorer at Davidson), power forward Oscar Tshiebwe (a former five-star recruit who left West Virginia), point guard Sahvir Wheeler (who led the SEC in assists at Georgia) and shooting guard CJ Fredrick (a 46% three-point shooter at Iowa) are all new. (Calipari's freshman recruiting class has only three players.) Duke and UNC also added significant transfer pieces.

Roughly 40% of players who join D-I programs out of high school leave their initial team by the end of sophomore year. Coaches like new Texas hire Chris Beard are driving that trend. This summer he approached the transfer market like a European soccer club would, signing six top transfers and just one freshman. On paper, it worked: Texas is the Big 12 favorite.

Overnight talent infusions have Texas, Kansas, Kentucky and Duke all back in SI's Top 20 *(page 84)*. How well these hastily assembled rosters come together will determine whether the bluebloods are still there in March.

—Jeremy Woo

the landscape. Bates rattles off a partial list of NBA players he considers friends: "LeBron, Ja [Morant], Dejounte Murray, KD, Miles Bridges—people I just got bonds with. Carmelo Anthony is a big brother." When Duren was pondering his next step, he consulted a Philadelphia connection, Clippers forward Marcus Morris.

"He spoke highly of Penny," Duren says. "Like: 'It's genuine—he has a lot of love for his players.' When I took a visit, I had that in mind."

There have been rumors that FedEx, which is based in Memphis, has been helping Hardaway lure talent with name, image and likeness opportunities, but in the new world of NIL, that speculation may be missing the point. Bates and Duren are so good, so well known, that they should make well into six figures immediately, whether they play in Memphis, Lexington or East Lansing—and soon they will make millions.

Duren will be a lottery pick next summer. Bates would be, too, but his birthday is his albatross: He was born Jan. 28, 2004, and, since NBA rules require players to be 18 at the start of a given draft's calendar year, he's currently not eligible until '23.

To say that Bates is hoping for a rule change or a waiver is an understatement. "That's my plan," he says, "and I'm sticking with it." Whatever happens, this much is clear: He was thinking about an exit strategy before he even got to Memphis. The challenge, then, is making his time there worthwhile for everybody.

COLLEGE PREVIEW 21 22

PENNY: WISE
It's been 13 years since Hardaway retired from the NBA, but he says he still identifies as a player first.

HARDAWAY HAS MORE at stake this season than his two stars. They could walk away any day, like former Tiger James Wiseman did two years ago, after the NCAA suspended him. (Wiseman was still the No. 2 pick in the draft, by the Warriors.) Hardaway probably needs this season to go well to secure the next wave of talent. To make this all work, he has to do more than just prep Bates and Duren for the pros. He must make them feel the same way he felt 30 years ago, when he played for what was then Memphis State.

"It was the best time of my life," Hardaway says. "I've had a ton of money, [was] blessed from God to make it to the NBA, but that's more business [than college]. It's not as fun."

He wants Bates and Duren to enjoy the moment instead of feeling squeezed between childhood and professional basketball. Theirs can be a confusing life stage. Bates says he likes Hardaway because "just talking to him, he knows how to treat kids." In another beat he says he's ready for the league of James and Durant. "Skill set, I feel like I'm there. Mentally, I feel like I'm there. It's just getting my body right." (Bates's father says of his son: "He's 17. He still has a ways to go. A lot of people perceive him as an adult, but he's not.")

Bates and Duren are each half-kid, half-superstar, and Hardaway has to treat them that way. He was a playing prodigy himself, but he says today's best players "come in more skilled and being able to do more things than we did, because all we did was play basketball all day. We never had a trainer." Yet he also recognizes that Bates and Duren require a softer touch than his coaches had with him.

"If I tell them, 'Hey, man, you let me down,' it'll hurt them," he says. "I want us to have a relationship that, if they feel like they let me down, they will feel bad and be like, 'All right, I'm not doing it again.' "

The Tigers are likely to be in the top 10 of most preseason polls. Hardaway says his main concern is chemistry. "[I'm] not worried about the X's and O's. Not worried about teaching and development. It's more about egos. You got so many good players, and everybody wants the same thing."

Duren and Bates are in Memphis because they wanted the same things. Not pedigree. Not individual achievement. Not even a national championship, though that's obviously *a* goal. They sought a sanctuary, a classroom and a feeling that the modern prep-basketball industry often fails to provide.

"I'm happy," Bates says. "I ain't been happy in a minute." □

JOE RONDONE/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL/USA TODAY NETWORK

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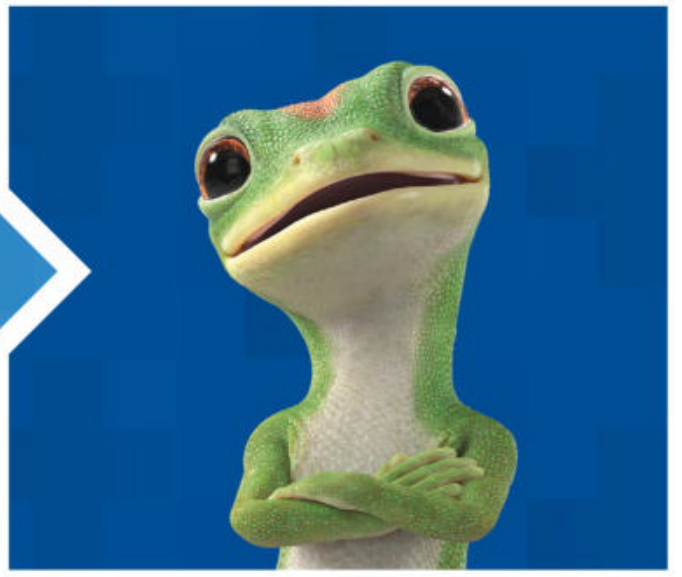

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MEN'S TOP 20

BY **KEVIN SWEENEY**

COLLEGE PREVIEW 21 22

1 GONZAGA

Dominant post scorer **DREW TIMME** and uber-skilled 7' 1" freshman Chet Holmgren will be the nation's best frontcourt tandem. Add senior point guard Andrew Nembhard, and Mark Few's Bulldogs should spend much of the year atop the polls—as they did last season.

2 TEXAS

New coach Chris Beard revamped the roster through the transfer portal, bringing in guards Marcus Carr (Minnesota) and Devin Askew (Kentucky); and forwards Timmy Allen (Utah), Dylan Disu (Vanderbilt), Christian Bishop (Creighton) and Tre Mitchell (UMass). Now comes the hard part: making everything fit.

3 KANSAS

Four starters return, including 6' 5" Ochai Agbaji and 6' 8" Jalen Wilson, who are NBA prospects. Bill Self also addressed the Jayhawks' glaring need for a dynamic ballhandler, landing 6-foot Arizona State transfer Remy Martin.

4 UCLA

Last year the Bruins became just the second team to advance from the First Four to the Final Four, but this time around their tournament footing should be more solid, thanks to the arrival of 6' 10" Myles Johnson (Rutgers) and five-star small forward Peyton Watson.

5 MICHIGAN

The return of All-American center Hunter Dickinson should be enough to keep the Wolverines among the elite. But they also have the No. 2 recruiting class and 6' 1" point guard DeVante' Jones, a transfer from Coastal Carolina.

6 MEMPHIS

College basketball's most interesting coaching staff (Penny Hardaway and assistants Rasheed Wallace and Larry Brown) will oversee a wildly talented roster led by 6' 9" freshman playmaker Emoni Bates.

7 BAYLOR

The defending champions lost four starters but still have the pieces to make a strong March run, including wing Matthew Mayer (39.5% from three) and 6' 1" guard James Akinjo, who led Arizona in scoring last year (15.6 ppg).

8 PURDUE

The Boilermakers have two of the nation's best bigs (6' 10" Trevion Williams and 7' 4" Zach Edey) and an exciting guard in 6' 4" **JADEN IVEY**—a makeup similar to the Purdue team that made the Elite Eight in 2019.

9 KENTUCKY

After the Wildcats' worst season (9–16) since 1926–27, John Calipari picks up experience and shooting from the transfer portal and, as usual, plenty of high-end high school talent.

10 VILLANOVA

No top team benefited more from the NCAA's ruling to give players an extra year of eligibility due to COVID-19. The Wildcats get back star point guard Collin Gillespie and versatile 6' 7" forward Jermaine Samuels.

11 DUKE

The Blue Devils have enough talent to give the soon-to-be-retired Mike Krzyzewski a memorable sendoff. Potential No. 1 pick Paolo Banchero, a 6' 10", 250-pound forward, is more polished than any newcomer in the nation. And 7-footer Mark Williams, who shot 66.4% last year, is poised to break out as a sophomore.

12 OREGON

Few teams have the Ducks' combination of depth, experience and talent in the backcourt. Syracuse transfer Quincy Guerrier will thrive as a playmaking big in their spread offense.

JAMIE SCHWABEROW/NCAA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (TIMME); JAY LAPRETE/NCAA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (IVEY)

GOING GLOBAL Ivey, who averaged 11.1 points as a freshman, was a breakout star at the under-19 world championship this summer, when the U.S. won gold.

13 HOUSTON

Kelvin Sampson has built a program with staying power, so the Cougars will remain relevant despite losing three starters. Guards Kyler Edwards and Marcus Sasser will score, and any Sampson-led team will defend and rebound well.

14 NORTH CAROLINA

The Tar Heels certainly seem well positioned to win big in Hubert Davis's first year at the helm. Transfers Dawson Garcia (Marquette) and Brady Manek (Oklahoma) form a versatile big-man trio with 6' 10" junior Armando Bacot.

15 ALABAMA

It was a breakthrough second season for Nate Oats, whose upbeat attack took off thanks to a deep stable of guards—to which he will add five-star recruit and electric leaper JD Davison.

16 ILLINOIS

Kofi Cockburn's surprise return gives the Illini as good a piece to build around as any in the country. The 7-foot, 285-pound junior averaged 17.7 points and 9.5 rebounds last season and pulled out of the draft to return to Champaign.

17 ARKANSAS

Eric Musselman clearly has this program on an upward trajectory, and a pair of versatile 6' 6" transfers, Stanley Umude (South Dakota) and Au'Diese Toney (Pittsburgh), are perfect fits in his positionless system.

18 OHIO STATE

The Buckeyes have finished in the top 16 of KenPom's final rankings in three of four years under Chris Holtmann, but have never made the Sweet 16. E.J. Liddell, a 6' 7" forward who averaged 16.2 points and a team-high 6.7 rebounds per game last season, could help change that.

19 INDIANA

Excitement is high for the dawn of the Mike Woodson era. Led by 6' 9" junior forward Trayce Jackson-Davis, the Hoosiers looked impressive during an August trip to the Bahamas, where they played a Serbian pro team.

20 TENNESSEE

Five-star point guard Kennedy Chandler and 6' 8" Auburn transfer Justin Powell, who had a pair of 26-point games before missing most of the season in concussion protocol, form a dangerous backcourt for Rick Barnes. □

WOMEN'S TOP 20

BY **EMMA BACCELLIERI** AND **ELIZABETH SWINTON**

COLLEGE PREVIEW 21 22

1 UCONN

To the chip on their shoulder after a Final Four loss to Arizona, the Huskies added No. 1 recruit Azzi Fudd, 5' 11" shooting guard. She joins Naismith Trophy winner **PAIGE BUECKERS**, dynamic scorer Christyn Williams and defensive force Olivia Nelson-Ododa.

2 SOUTH CAROLINA

The Final Four core—led by guard Zia Cooke and 6' 5" post Aliyah Boston—gets a boost from the country's top transfer class. The headliner is 6' 7" Kamilla Cardoso, who was the ACC's Freshman of the Year and co–Defender of the Year last season at Syracuse.

3 STANFORD

The reigning champ brings back a versatile roster, led by do-it-all guard Haley Jones. Former five-star recruit Jana Van Gytenbeek, a 5' 7" playmaker, will help make up for the absence of Kiana Williams. The Cardinal may not have one flashy strength, but they have almost no weaknesses, either.

4 MARYLAND

The country's top offense last season, led by backcourt juniors Ashley Owusu (17.9 ppg) and Diamond Miller (17.3), will be even stronger. But can the Terps avoid a second straight Sweet 16 upset?

ON A RAMPAIGE
As a freshman, Bueckers led the Huskies in points (20.0), assists (5.8) and steals (2.3) per game.

CARMEN MANDATO/GETTY IMAGES (BUECKERS); ELSA/GETTY IMAGES (SMITH)

5 LOUISVILLE

The loss of guard Dana Evans will be lessened by two transfers: 6' 1" Emily Engstler averaged 9.1 boards mostly off the Syracuse bench last season, and 5' 7" Chelsie Hall scored 1,039 points in four years at Vanderbilt.

6 BAYLOR

The Bears are without three of their top playmakers as well as coach Kim Mulkey, who left for LSU. Her replacement, former Atlanta Dream coach Nicki Collen, will build around Wade Trophy winner **NALYSSA SMITH**.

7 N.C. STATE

The nucleus that propelled the Wolfpack to back-to-back ACC championships returns, including 6' 5" leading scorer Elissa Cunane (16.3 ppg) and the conference co–Sixth Player of the Year, 6' 2" Jada Boyd.

8 INDIANA

The Hoosiers hope to build on their best season ever (21–6), highlighted by a defeat of a No. 1 seed, N.C. State, in the NCAA tournament. All–Big Ten selections Mackenzie Holmes and Grace Berger anchor the offense.

9 OREGON

In redshirt juniors 6' 5" Nyara Sabally (7.3 rpg) and 6' 7" Sedona Prince, the Ducks have one of the nation's most feared frontcourt duos. Both bigs will benefit from USC transfer and All–Pac 12 point guard Endyia Rogers.

10 MICHIGAN

As a junior, All-American power forward Naz Hillmon topped Rudy Tomjanovich's school record with 50 points in a game and lifted the Wolverines to their first Sweet 16 berth. Will she lift the Naismith Trophy this season?

11 IOWA

Caitlin Clark led the country in scoring in 2020–21, pouring in 26.6 points per game. She was also third in assists with 7.1 and, oh, yeah, she was just a freshman. An improved defense could yield a Big Ten championship.

12 IOWA STATE

Led by top scorer Ashley Joens (24.2 ppg), a 6-foot junior, the Cyclones have continuity and emerging talent. They also have enough quality shooters—36.4% accuracy on threes last season—to keep up constant pressure.

13 KENTUCKY

Senior Rhyne Howard might be the best player in the SEC. The 6' 2" guard led the team last year in points (20.7 per game), rebounds (7.3) and assists (3.8). But the departure of three starters—without much of a recruiting class to replace them—creates question marks.

14 OREGON STATE

The Beavers will have a different look without playmakers Aleah Goodman and Sasha Goforth. But guards Talia von Oelhoffen and Greta Kampschroeder, a five-star freshman, will have the team fit to compete.

15 WEST VIRGINIA

Kysre Gondrezick is now in the WNBA, but transfers will allow the Mountaineers, who were second in the Big 12 last season, to maintain a balanced attack. Forward Esmery Martinez averaged a double double as a sophomore.

16 OHIO STATE

There's been transfer churn in Columbus: Out are Dorka Juhász (UConn) and Aaliyah Patty (Texas A&M), and in is 5' 11" Taylor Mikesell, who was the 2019 Big Ten Freshman of the Year at Maryland before moving to Oregon.

17 FLORIDA STATE

Behind All-ACC guard Morgan Jones, the Seminoles will try to find consistency after an up-and-down year frequently disrupted by COVID-19. A strong recruiting class—ranked No. 13 by ESPN—should help.

18 SOUTH FLORIDA

After winning their first AAC regular-season and tournament titles, the Bulls have their starting lineup back, including (thanks to the COVID-19 waiver) forward Bethy Mununga.

19 GEORGIA TECH

Five starters return from last year's Sweet 16 team—a great sign for a program coming off back-to-back seasons with double-digit ACC victories for the first time. Before coach Nell Fortner arrived, the Yellow Jackets had losing conference records for five straight years.

20 TENNESSEE

Despite losing leader Rennia Davis, the Vols are poised to continue their upward trajectory thanks in part to the addition of Sun Belt Player of the Year Alexus Dye. □

BLE

JEANETTE LEE,

THE BRASH FACE OF BILLIARDS IN THE 1990S, IS APPRECIATING THE LITTLE THINGS ON HER JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY AFTER A CANCER DIAGNOSIS

Black Widow's SSINGS

BY **ALEX PREWITT**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JEFFERY A. SALTER

INSIDE A WINDOWLESS ROOM WITH A PAINTING OF SLEEPING PUPPIES ON THE WALL, JEANETTE LEE CLAMBERS ATOP AN EXAM TABLE AND SWAYS HER SANDALED FEET OFF THE EDGE, BACK AND FORTH.

A close friend stands at her side, holding a raft of supplies: a lumbar support pillow, a coffee thermos with a spider-web image stamped across the bottom, a bag containing two McGriddle breakfast sandwiches and some oatmeal. These provisions will help Lee weather another long day of waiting while a four-drug chemotherapy cocktail is pumped through a port in her chest.

Other than her sky-blue toenail polish and a Christmas-themed cloth mask, Lee, 49, is sporting her signature monochromatic look. Black sweatpants warm her weakened legs. Black sunglasses rest on her hairless head. The front of her black T-shirt reads BLACK WIDOW STRONG. And on the back: #PRAYFORTHEBLACKWIDOW.

A first-generation Korean American who piled up more than 30 national and international titles, millions in earnings and unheard-of fame for a professional pool player, Lee was first dubbed the Black Widow three decades ago by the owner of a billiards club not far from her childhood home in Brooklyn. "Because," she says dryly, "I'd lure my opponents to the table and eat them alive."

Now Lee is facing her toughest foe yet, even if she prefers not to frame the treatment of her Stage IV ovarian cancer through the prism of winning and losing. Rather, she describes a period of self-discovery in which she finds meaning by sharing the depths of her "journey"—or her "walk"—with family, friends and fans.

Half an hour from her Tampa home, in the exam room of a cancer center where the fifth of her six scheduled chemotherapy sessions will soon take place, an oncologist enters and asks a battery of questions. Any headaches, nausea, vomiting? "Nausea." Trouble doing routine activities? "I have a lot of pain in my knees and ankles. More than usual."

The doctor walks through Lee's white-blood-cell and platelet counts (both stable) and the results of her latest CEA test, which measures for a tumor-marking protein (encouragingly low). He explains that, after chemotherapy, Lee will likely be placed on "maintenance" medicine to prevent a recurrence. "This is not a curable cancer," he clarifies, "but we are using different kinds of treatments to prolong life. That's our goal."

"So, is it possible that after I do the sixth treatment you say, 'O.K., it looks like you're in remission, and now I'm gonna have you on maintenance'?" Lee asks.

"It's possible. It's definitely possible."

The doctor extends a fist. Lee bumps it.

"Yes," she says, rising from the table and heading for the infusion suite. "Yes, yes, yes."

A LITTLE KNOWN FACT about Jeanette Lee: She is terrified of spiders. Once, in the early 1990s, a fan gave her an actual venomous, female black widow. Lee accepted, out of politeness, but she kept the arachnid in a terrarium on the balcony of her Los Angeles home to be safe . . . until Lee realized her new pet was actually super pregnant, at which point she drove "very far away" and ditched it next to a dumpster.

JOHNNY NUNEZ/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

Otherwise, nothing stood—or even crawled—in Lee's way. A dropout from the prestigious Bronx High School of Science, Lee took up pool in the late 1980s after stumbling into (the now closed) Chelsea Billiards. She quickly grew obsessed, practicing 16 hours a day on dimly lit tables and tacking a poster to the wall of her cramped Midtown apartment. MASTER THE 8 BALL, it read, MASTER THE WORLD.

Three years after she first picked up a piece of chalk, Lee joined the Women's Professional Billiards Association tour. But she was an outcast from the start, criticized for her eye-grabbing match getup—long black hair cascading down a sleeveless black catsuit, accentuated by a two-fingered black glove on her bridge hand—and for her fierce table demeanor. At the 1993 world championships, as Lee later recounted in her book, *The Black Widow's Guide to Killer Pool*, fellow U.S. players taunted her and booed during her matches. "Month after month," she wrote, "I cried every night of every tournament."

Lee persisted, winning the WPBA nationals and the U.S. Open 9 ball championship in 1993. She also won over many opponents. "She came on hot and heavy, like a bull in a china closet," says LoreeJon Hasson, an eight-time world champion and one of Lee's biggest rivals. "But the good thing about Jeanette was that she proved it."

There is no question that ESPN provided a major boost to Lee's visibility, televising the entire WPBA tour in '93 and more-than-doubling its billiards programming between 2002 and '03, up to 260 airings in one year. She starred in a "This is *SportsCenter*" commercial, posed for the Body Issue and worked the red carpet as a host at the 2006 ESPYs.

SPIDER CENTS

The Black Widow was seemingly everywhere—including NBA All-Star weekend (above)—in 2008, earning $800,000.

But Lee also built a global following through old-fashioned hustle, capitalizing on her talent and charisma as an Asian American woman in a sports world marketed to men. She inked sponsorship deals with Rocawear and Bass Pro Shops, taught pool fundamentals on military bases and walloped pro athletes at the NFLPA's Super Bowl party. "They loved the idea of the Black Widow—someone really good, really sexy," Lee says of her various employers. Plus the scratch was solid: In 2008, her agent, Tom George, estimated that Lee was slated to earn some $800,000 that year, with only $25,000 coming from tournament winnings.

"I always felt like, no matter what happens in my life, I'd always have pool," says Lee. "But my body wouldn't let me."

Indeed, pain has always been Lee's biggest nemesis. Around age 12 she had two 18-inch metal rods implanted, from her scalp to her spine, to treat severe scoliosis, and a half-dozen follow-up operations awaited in adulthood. In 2013, when Lee was enshrined in the WPBA Hall of Fame, her personal physician introduced her by showing blown-up X-rays of her back. But even that failed to capture the daily

agony Lee endured: a med school textbook's worth of ailments, including bursitis, pseudoarthrosis and ankylosing spondylitis. Then there were the panic attacks that came late in her career, brought on by the crowds that tailed her into restaurants, begging for autographs. "I'd have trouble breathing and find myself in a closet, hiding," Lee says.

Early in January 2020, Lee woke up gasping for air. At first she wrote this off as more panic attacks—but when the shortness of breath worsened, she went to a hospital. Tests revealed fluid buildup in the area between her lungs and chest. Then the worst was confirmed: The fluid was filled with cancerous cells that had metastasized to her abdomen, liver and peritoneum.

Less than a week later, Lee trudged into the Tampa cancer center for her first dose of chemotherapy.

WHEN LEE first discovered her fate, she thought about two things: There was the ticking clock of a vicious form of cancer, with its 30.3% five-year relative survival rate. Lee's way of dealing with that was to set a modest personal goal: live to see her 50th birthday, in July.

And there was her family. In addition to three adult children who live on their own, Lee also raises three young daughters by herself in Tampa. "As soon as I told them, it became very quiet in the household," Lee says. "I kept saying, 'I'm going to fight this.' And they kept going, 'Yes, I know, Mommy.' But they were crying. They were terrified."

They weren't alone. "The fact that there's a chance they could grow up without a mom is just mortifying," Lee says. Still, she met cancer with the same ferocity that turned a high school dropout into a world champion. "I'm incredibly stubborn," she says. "And my love of my children far exceeds anything I can imagine."

Each day brings some new test. Following her third round of chemo, Lee underwent a robot-assisted surgery to remove her uterus and ovaries, as well as some small masses near her abdomen. "They got everything they wanted to get out," Lee recalls, "so I asked [the surgeon], 'Can I feel like I'm coasting?' He said, 'No, because at any point you could just stop.' I told him, 'I'm not gonna stop.' And he's like, 'But a lot of people do.' " Nausea and vomiting were constant side effects of the chemo, and spicy Korean foods made her taste buds feel as if they'd been "shaved with razor blades." She also began experiencing a mental fog she calls "chemo brain," losing track of thoughts mid-sentence. "That's the most annoying thing," she says. "I tend to be fairly articulate, and I'm worried I won't get it back."

Whenever Lee slips, though, there's always a web of helpers to catch her. "I feel like I'm constantly in a state of falling back, sitting down on the ground," Lee says. "And then I've got my fans and my friends and my family reaching out, pulling me back up."

Wherever her journey takes her, she's not alone. She connects with her 135,000 Facebook followers one 20-minute video at a time, sharing stories about pool and her treatments, and in return she receives countless suggestions for miracle pills and magical foods she really ought to try.

Having cancer, she says, "can feel like being cooped up in a closet, dark and alone, and that's such a miserable existence. Whereas if you're not in that closet, you're still suffering but you're talking to people, you're sharing, and they're there for you. And that's gratifying. To think you could feel gratified by something horrible that's happening to you is just a blessing."

Blessing. Around Lee, that word comes up a lot. Some of that is a product of her strong Christian faith. But she also sees survival as a matter of finding little blessings throughout each day. "In my mind, if I stay positive and active, I can will myself to live a little longer," Lee says.

Blessings, these days, come in simple forms—time with her three-pound toy chihuahua, Thor, or lunch at Cracker Barrel with friends, or picking out kitschy gifts for her daughters: lip gloss, a jigsaw puzzle and a powder that turns bath water into gooey slime. At night, eager to keep the good vibes going, she coaxes this reporter into visiting an escape room tucked inside a business plaza, where after solving a series of medieval-themed puzzles she wears a chintzy foam crown and grins for a photo.

"What a blessing today is," she says on the drive back.

At home, Lee bites into a slice of pepperoni pizza, searing her tongue, then empties a pile of pills from a lunchbox-sized organizer. Taking a quick breath, she swallows the lot in a single gulp, washing the meds down with nothing but air.

RIGHT ON CUE
Lee doesn't play much pool now, but she's passed her love of the game on to daughters (from left) Chloe, Savannah and Cheyenne.

ON JULY 9, her 50th birthday, Lee rejoiced on Facebook: "I'm so glad to have made it here. . . . It was looking doubtful in January. But I'm sure that [it] is with your support and prayers that I'm here today. I love you all."

The milestone, though, came with an asterisk. Having completed chemo, she was eager to hear those three magic words from her oncologist: *You're in remission*. Instead, she was crushed to learn her body had only a "partial response." Traces of the cancer are still detectable in her lymph nodes.

Depression set in, and Lee spent hours in bed, crying. All the while, the long shadow of her particular condition looms: The recurrence rate for Stage IV ovarian cancer is roughly 90%. When finally Lee pulled herself up and out of bed, she resolved to refocus on those little blessings. She visited Busch Gardens with her daughters, renting an electric wheelchair to keep up while they rode the roller coasters. She even played pool for the first time in two years, racking up at a local event. Her back ached and her stroke felt crooked, but she beat three challengers with ease.

A few weeks later, she grabbed her lumbar support pillow and drove two hours to Orlando, where a friend was hosting a fundraiser on her behalf. There, a line of fans snaked around the block to see her inside a nightclub. At one point, an elderly man with a cane hobbled forward and broke into tears. He explained that he was recently diagnosed with cancer and that he withdrew into his home, shades pulled, to wait for death to take him in the darkness.

Then, as she recalls later, this man said he found one of Lee's videos on Facebook. "Something you said just clicked," he tells her. So he watched them all. Pretty soon he was eating again, showering again, leaving the house again. Living again.

He tells Lee all of this. And then he tells the Black Widow that she is a blessing to the world. □

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HOW LONG CAN WE

BY CHRIS BALLARD

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL MARSICANO

AND WHAT DOES THAT QUESTION
EVEN MEAN TO YOU? INSIDE THE QUEST
TO POSTPONE ATHLETIC MORTALITY

BOB MYERS WAS SPRINTING DOWN A BASKETBALL COURT IN THE FALL OF 2017 WHEN HE FELT A WEIRD PAIN IN HIS RIGHT LEG.

At the time Myers was 42 and in his fifth year as the general manager of the Warriors. He loved his job—but what he really loved was playing the game. He'd starred in high school, walked on at UCLA and basically never stopped. Rec leagues, the YMCA, some dude's driveway. Myers loved playing ball the way that some people love running or cooking or painting—with a deep, consuming passion that rushes up from the core. And in it he found not just joy but also identity and the escape that comes from a flow state, when the stress of life is muted and all that remains is the next possession or corner jumper.

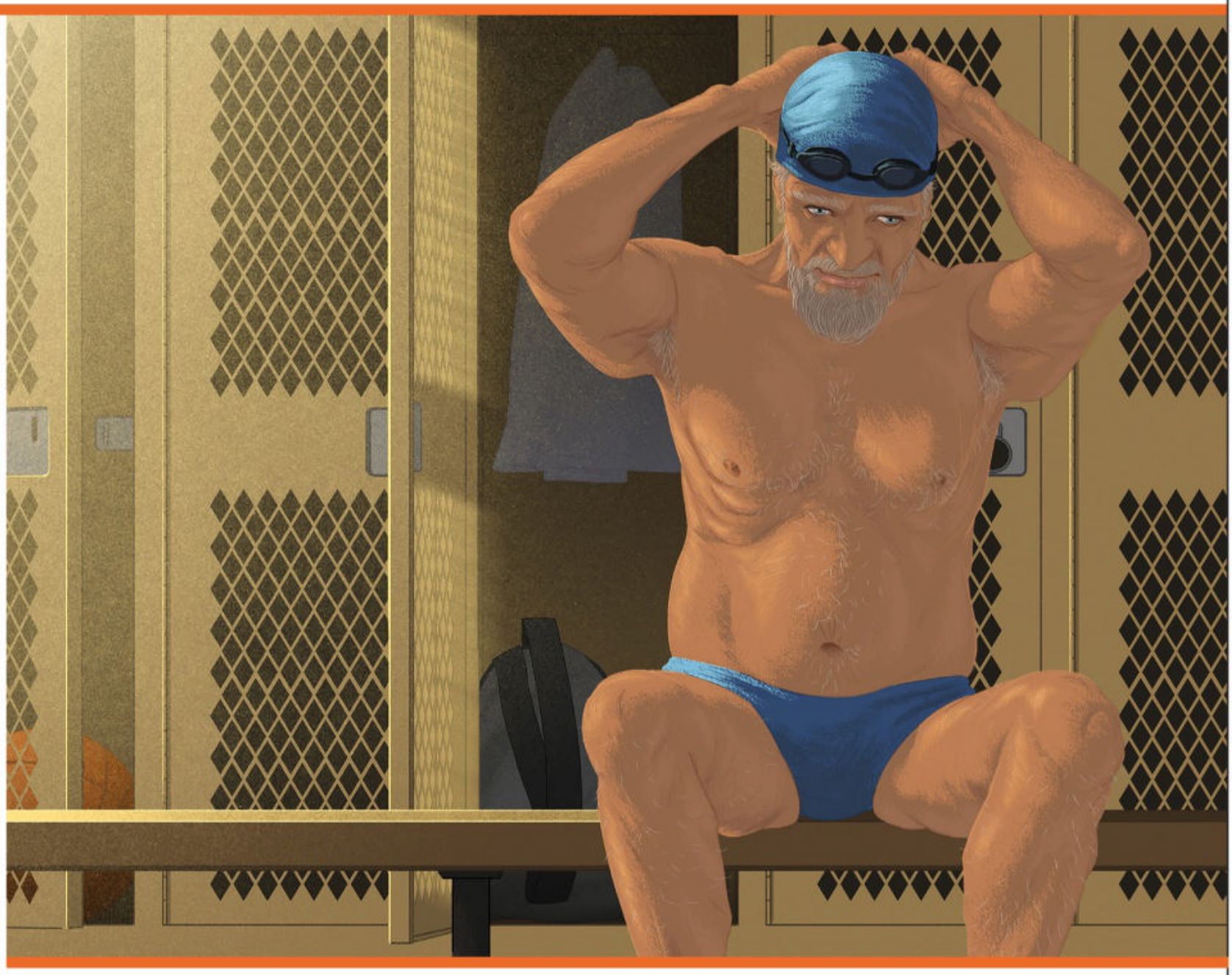
Now that was threatened. When the ache spread to his hip, Myers chose the time-tested approach of athletes everywhere: He ignored the pain and kept going. And 10 years earlier that might have worked. The aging body, however, has a long memory. It didn't matter that Myers was in ridiculously good health—he exercised daily, ate well and had the body fat of a greyhound. The invoice on all those years of sprinting and leaping had come due. "It felt like my leg was exploding," he says.

Myers underwent a series of surgeries, but none fixed the issue. Finally a doctor gave him the bad news: He needed a hip replacement. And this freaked him out. Partly because he saw himself as far too young for a replacement, and partly because of the recovery time, but mainly because of what it all might mean. He began inquiring about plastic versus metal, about the best surgeons and hospitals. But what he really wanted to know—the question so many of us ask at some point, whether we're professional or weekend athletes—was: *Will I still be able to play?*

He was not yet ready to entertain the next question. *What will I do if the answer is no?*

LAST FEBRUARY a giddily inebriated 43-year-old man staggered off a boat in Tampa. The world had a good laugh about it: *Tom Brady looks hammered!* That it was funny, even endearing, was on account of the context, because of course Brady never gets drunk (that we know of). He supposedly monitors everything that enters his body, much as a trader monitors the tiniest fluctuations in the market, surviving on a diet void of sugars, starches, dairy or anything else that tastes good or is fun to eat.

Brady is among a cadre of athletes redefining what it means to be old, at least by the standards of pro sports. Oksana Chusovitina, a gymnast from Uzbekistan, just competed in her eighth Olympics, at 46, while Sue Bird won her



fifth gold medal in basketball, at 40. In May, Phil Mickelson became the oldest golfer to win a major, at 50. The list goes on. Diana Nyad swam from Cuba to Florida at 64. Hélio Castroneves won the Indy 500 at 46. Vince Carter kept dunking in the NBA right up until he was 43.

Still, for decades we've been warned about the ravages of time. Starting around age 35 we begin to lose roughly 1% of our muscle mass every year. Simultaneously, we become more prone to injury, as our ligaments and tendons stiffen and our cartilage thins, like an eraser wearing down to the nub.

Meanwhile, our average VO2 max—the amount of oxygen our body can use during exercise—drops by roughly 10% in our 40s, 15% in our 50s and 20% in our 60s, accompanied by a steady decline in reaction time and bone density. Like our smartphones, our bodies are designed for obsolescence.

And yet: Today's sports heroes play longer and better than ever before. They benefit not only from the inherent genetic advantage of all great athletes, but also from decades of elite training, cutting-edge treatments and the time and money to enact them. LeBron James, who played MVP-caliber ball last year at 36, reportedly spends more than $1 million of his own money on his body annually. He employs a personal biomechanist (former Navy SEAL Donnie Raimon), receives liquid nitrogen treatments to reduce inflammation and enjoys the benefits of expensive hot and cold tubs in his home. Steph Curry (still relatively young at 33) swears by float spas and cryotherapy. Roger Federer (40) owns a hyperbaric chamber and sleeps 10 to 12 hours a night in absolute darkness.

Inspirational though they may be, these athletes are about as relatable as aliens. Most aging Americans instead

resort to quick fixes to stay active, and marketers are happy to oblige. The anti-aging industry accounts for more than $40 billion in annual sales, affecting what we buy, eat, slather on our face and, in some cases, inject into our bloodstream. Using terms like *wellness* and *rejuvenation*, and banking on our collective fear and vanity, the largely unregulated industry hawks products that so often make impossible claims, igniting in us conflagrations of hope.

The result: While pro athletes are encouraged to age gracefully—*Know when to hang it up!*—the rest of us believe that we can be 70 and rocked. That we should emulate 85-year-old marathoners. That if Tom Brady can keep going, so can we.

Thus, hope stirs in the belly of people like Bob Myers—and perhaps you. Maybe we can play forever, or close to it. Maybe the end can be continually pushed ahead of us, like a hockey puck nudged forward again and again. The upside is significant: Study after study says that to play longer is to increase happiness, well-being and lifespan.

Deciding to push on can be easy. The difficult part is deciding how much you're willing to sacrifice to do so.

THE HISTORY of humans doing questionable things in hopes of performing longer and better goes back millennia. In ancient societies men ate the testicles of animals, and sometimes of their foes. Greek Olympians were big fans of hallucinogens, while French cyclists in the 1800s drank a mixture of wine and coca leaf—liquid cocaine, essentially. In the late 19th century, in Paris, a professor named Charles Edouard Brown-Séquard became a sensation after announcing that he'd developed a concoction, composed of the crushed testes of dogs and guinea pigs, that boosted his strength and stamina to heroic levels. An opportunistic American baseball player named Jim "Pud" Galvin injected the elixir, thus marking, as Bill Gifford notes in his book *Spring Chicken*, "the first recorded modern use of a performance-enhancing substance by an athlete." (Shockingly, Galvin found no clear advantage.)

By the early 1900s athletes had experimented with heroin, ether and, in one case, strychnine mixed with brandy (which almost killed an Olympic marathoner). In World War II, superpowers began dosing soldiers with amphetamines to fuel them through battle despite sleep deprivation. It didn't take long for U.S. troops in military sports leagues to realize that "greenies"—or "la bomba" as Italian cyclists came to call them—also did a damn fine job of keeping you focused on a game. "After that, they spread like wildfire in all types of sports," says Charles Yesalis, a professor emeritus at Penn State who has written extensively on performance enhancers in athletics. By '58 the FDA had approved anabolic steroids. (It would be another 30 years before they were banned for nonmedical uses.)

At the same time, a sea change was occurring in how we view exercise. In the late 1960s and early '70s regular people began running, not just to catch the bus but for fitness and longevity. Jane Fonda and Richard Simmons and Jim Fixx became icons. Weightlifting, long avoided in high-level sports for fear of injury and decreased flexibility, was embraced. Jack LaLanne begat *Pumping Iron*, which begat skinny teens in basements straining away on Soloflex machines, which begat, eventually, jacked moms Crossfitting in temperature-controlled studios.

IT CAN TAKE FIVE YEARS FOR A DISCOVERY MADE IN A LAB TO TRICKLE DOWN TO COACHES AND TRAINERS, AND ANOTHER DECADE TO REACH THE REST OF US. ***FOR MOST MIDLIFE ATHLETES, THAT'S FAR TOO LATE.***

Meanwhile, each decade brought leaps in our understanding of nutrition and training. Gone was the athlete who took a shot of whiskey before a game to calm their nerves, or a smoke break at halftime, as Vlade Divac was known to do. As technology advanced, professional careers extended. In 1982 the NBA counted only one player 35 or older, Elvin Hayes. Last season there were 16—and that trend is mirrored throughout sports.

Eventually, inevitably, the anti-aging industry and the athletic performance industry intertwined, with weird results. Now, HGH and testosterone are no longer solely the tools of bodybuilders, MLB sluggers and NFL linemen, but also of CEOs, bankers and life hackers. Now, science and salesmanship can be hard to separate; outcomes are murky—enhancing performance doesn't necessarily mean extending longevity—and those people with time, money and privilege have a huge head start on the rest.

Now, we live in an era of possibility. Even if many of us don't yet know it.

IN JUNE the Nets lost to the Bucks in Game 7 of the Eastern Conference semifinals, in large part because one of their three stars, Kyrie Irving, was out with a sprained right ankle, and another, James Harden, was hobbling on a Grade 2 right hamstring strain. The third, Kevin Durant, who'd recently returned from a devastating right Achilles tear, couldn't single-handedly will his team to the Finals, though he came preposterously close. One month later,

with eerie timing, the team's owners, Joe and Clara Tsai, announced the launch of a grand initiative aimed at furthering the science of performance and longevity.

The nonprofit, which the Tsais funded with $220 million, brings together six top research schools in hopes of applying rigor to a field laden with anecdotal information. That the Tsais' Human Performance Alliance sounds like something out of a Marvel movie is not intentional, but it matches the scale of ambition. Over the next decade the foundation will take "moonshots" in a variety of fields and share the results widely. "Open-source science," director Scott Delp calls it.

Delp, a compact man in his 60s, is the chairman of Stanford's department of bioengineering as well as a devoted adventure racer. His lab, which serves as the Alliance's de facto hub, creates predictive digital replicas of athletes, based on their workout and injury histories. (One aim: to improve the accuracy of smartwatches, which Delp says show a "40% to 80% error" in measuring caloric burn.)

Elsewhere in the Alliance, Kathryn Ackerman, director of the Female Athlete Program at Boston Children's Hospital, focuses on decreasing the likelihood and severity of injuries among women, including bone fractures and ACL tears. While the Alliance doesn't focus exclusively on aging-related issues, the research is particularly applicable to those in midlife and beyond because, as Delp puts it, "it's not time that does in athletes—it's injuries."

Listening to these scientists can feel like a peek behind a curtain. At the Salk Institute in San Diego, Satchidananda Panda studies circadian rhythm from a genetic standpoint, and he's found that thousands of genes in our organs "turn on" at certain times of the day, primarily dawn and dusk, allowing us to make greater gains in muscle-building and in recovery when we have strong circadian rhythm. (For this reason, he now exercises around 6 p.m.) He's also discovered unexpected benefits to time-restricted eating, often hyped as "intermittent fasting." When Panda fed mice exclusively inside of an eight-to-12-hour window, the animals doubled their endurance on a treadmill and their muscle mass rose significantly, all without additional exercise. The reason is simple: If your body is busy responding to all the food you put into it, it can't enter recovery mode.

At UC Davis, Keith Baar, a molecular physiologist and Alliance partner, will tell you that cartilage is not, in fact, a finite resource. Not only can you preserve it, but in some cases you can also regenerate it. (One method involves consuming gelatin before working out; another, the so-called hyena diet, entails eating all the chewy parts of meat.) Baar has determined, too, that a targeted 10-minute session of isometric holds, performed six to eight hours before sports, can strengthen tendons, ligaments and cartilage, reducing the threat of injury. In one study, he worked with a pro basketball player who suffered from patellar tendinopathy. "You could see a hole under his kneecap on the MRI," says Baar. After a season of the exercises the hole disappeared. Now imagine what that could do for a rickety 50-year-old.

Of course, this 50-year-old would first have to know about the process—which leads us to a persistent issue in the field: information flow. Breakthroughs essentially arrive in time capsules. Baar estimates that it takes five years for a discovery made in a lab to trickle down to athletic coaches and trainers, and another decade to reach the rest of us. For most midlife athletes, that's far too late.

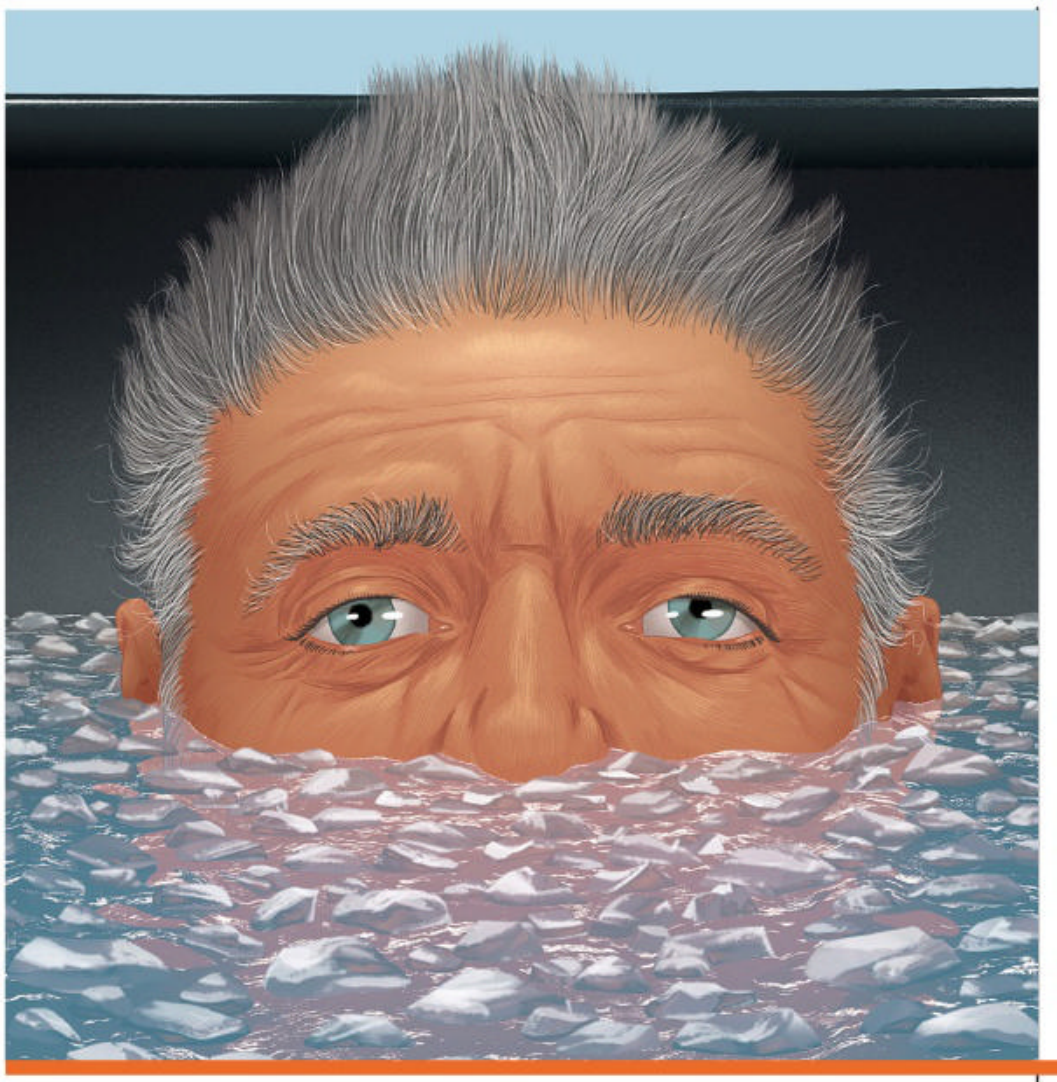
Part of this is that, well, science is confusing and difficult to explain. Another factor is that incremental advances don't often qualify as news. But, mainly, it has to do with money. Take Baar's exercises. His routine is simple, easy to explain and doesn't require an app or a $9.99 subscription or a gizmo that Shaq can hawk on late-night television. Which also means that it's almost impossible to monetize (though no doubt someone will try). "People are making a lot of money by making things seem more complex," says Baar. "If you say, 'Actually, it's really easy,' they say, 'You're going to lose market share.' " (There's a reason one of the only free fitness phenomena in recent years, the seven-minute workout, is so effective and widespread: It was designed by a professor, not a for-profit company, and distributed by *The New York Times*.)

All of which brings us, in a very roundabout way, back to the Nets. Because, as remarkable as Durant's playoff performance was, almost as remarkable was the speed and extent of his recovery from an Achilles tear, an injury that, until recently, effectively ended careers. Money and expertise certainly helped—the Nets equipped Durant with an

antigravity treadmill and employed biosensors to track his motion—but so did information. If you knew even a fraction of everything Durant's team knows about treating and preventing injuries, you'd be infinitely better equipped to avoid them as you aged. Instead, for most of us, a 10-year lag might as well be a lifetime.

Now, imagine if that lag were to shrink, while the science kept improving. In this world, which may not be too far off, we'll be able to model and identify incipient stress fractures before they form. We'll be able to replace parts rather than repair certain injuries. (Baar has already grown ligaments three centimeters long in a lab.) We may be able to take a safe oral medication that can effectively halt, if not reverse, the age-related loss of muscle strength. (Currently in preclinical trials, the drug works by inhibiting an enzyme called 15-hydroxyprostaglandin dehydrogenase.) Already, we can begin to play the odds. Anyone can send a cheek swab to the Bay Area lab AxGen and receive an algorithmic breakdown of their injury risk based on DNA comparisons with a database of 500,000 people.

In this world, Durant would not only recover more quickly, he would also, theoretically, never even suffer such an injury in the first place. And neither might you, no matter your age. But what if the damage is already done?



ATHLETES, IT IS often said, die two times. The second is the final curtain that awaits each of us. The first is when they can no longer compete.

No one is ready for the end when it comes. Steve Kerr certainly wasn't. After the Warriors' coach retired as an NBA player in 2003, at 37, he knew he would miss basketball, but he also had grand plans for the second half of his athletic life. He would play tennis. Lower his golf handicap. Maybe run a marathon.

And at first he did. He and a friend played epic tennis matches, crushing backhands and sprinting across the court. Then he came home one day and noticed his left knee hurt like hell. A month later it was the right. A doctor told him: *You're bone-on-bone. You can't play hardcourt tennis anymore*. And Kerr, then 42, was floored. "I was totally unprepared," he says. Within a year he gave up high-impact sports entirely; within five he needed back surgery. When that went poorly, Kerr faced a world in which competitive exercise—fuel for someone like him—was replaced by monotonous sessions on the stairclimber. It hit him hard.

"Phil Jackson used to talk about retiring from playing as a 'death' and tell us we had to prepare for the loss," says Kerr. "I used to think he was being a bit dramatic. Now I understand exactly what he was talking about."

Kerr's situation is unique, but his struggle is common. For years Michelle Silver, a sociologist at the University of Toronto, studied doctors as they shifted from being on call to doing secondary work to eventually retiring. And she found that, at the end, they essentially fell off a cliff. One day they were respected and passionate, with a clear purpose. Then they were just normal people.

Silver turned her focus to sports and found athletes weren't much different. Robbed of identity and purpose, the people she studied often fell into depression after retiring. They got divorced and remarried, in search of meaning. Some turned to substance use or otherwise lost their way for years, decades. Others just never adapted to a life where they couldn't be the athlete they once were—where they couldn't be the strongest in the gym or the fastest on the track. Instead, they gave up on the sport they loved. "There should be a manual for managing this," Silver says. "Aging has become something to be feared, more than ever."

I REMEMBER the last time I felt immortal. It was 2011 and I was 37, sitting in an orthopedist's office, annoyed my appointment was taking so long. Then a doctor walked in, held up an X-ray and told me, in so many words, that I had the hips of a 70-year-old. Undoubtedly, this had

to do with my having spent decades playing basketball every chance I got. "You'll need to replace the right one," he said. Not somewhere in the distant, hazy future. Soon.

I tried to buy time. Physical therapy helped for a while. Cortisone shots gave momentary relief. The first one earned me a month of hoops. The second bought me a week—but, oh, what a glorious week it was, sprinting and leaping pain-free. I didn't realize it in the moment, but it was the last time I'd ever feel that way.

Six months later there I was lying on a gurney in a San Francisco hospital at 6 a.m., unable to feel much below my neck, staring up at a man with perfect teeth as he told me, "This will only take a moment." When I woke up I'd have a new hip. I had nothing to worry about.

"Did I do a great job?" he asked many months later, after yet another complication. "Maybe not. But did I do a good enough job? I'd like to think so."

The hardest part was not the recovery, or the rehab, or the cane, or the freak-outs about addiction to painkillers. The hardest part was adapting to the new me. My doctors were clear: You can ride a bike. You can swim. You can walk. But no more running. And definitely no more basketball.

This wasn't a viable option. I'd grown up playing ball therapy. Did the math and realized I have been injured and unable to play hoops 55 out of the last 72 months. My rapidly declining athleticism and eroding basketball skills have turned me into a net negative for any team I play on. It's no longer fun to play. So I am done. And I am sad, yes, but also relieved. I feel like I did when I gave up booze 25 years ago, absolutely ready to give up the 10% of drunken fun so I would no longer have the 90% of drunken misery."

The email hit hard. I should have been happy for him. Instead I felt betrayed. I wasn't ready to give up the game. Already its absence had exacted a toll. I mourned the player I once was, able to rely on athleticism to cover for mistakes. I knew the new me would be different. Then I felt bad for thinking so much about it, considering all the vastly more important problems in the world, but that didn't help either. So I saw more physical therapists. I took an anti-inflammatory, Mobic, before playing and drank electrolytes afterward. I bought expensive Hoka shoes to cushion my joints. I tore my plantar fascia (playing basketball) and developed knee tendinitis (playing basketball) and wrenched my back (preparing to play basketball). I dialed back to once a week, an hour at a time. I played only indoors, on a forgiving floor. I traded longevity tips with friends. I got

THE HARDEST PART OF MY SURGERY WAS NOT THE RECOVERY,
OR THE REHAB, OR THE FREAK-OUTS ABOUT ADDICTION TO PAINKILLERS.
THE HARDEST PART WAS ADAPTING TO THE NEW ME.

and had never stopped, competing in three rec leagues a week into my 30s. I thought back to the conversations about aging that I'd had during my years as a sportswriter, and how each of us deals with the imminent end in different ways, from denial to unrealistic optimism to going cold turkey. I remembered Pistons coach Rick Carlisle, sitting in his office back in 2002, only 42 and not far removed from his days as an NBA shooting guard, telling me that he no longer played the game, not even for fun. That he didn't miss it. I thought about a 35-year-old Kobe Bryant, at a hotel in China, just before his body broke down, insisting that he had another five years in him—that he would be the one to defeat Father Time. I thought about surfer Laird Hamilton, at 53, saying, "I'm not going to fall victim to what I'm supposed to do at any certain age." I thought back to a conversation with Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, with whom I have little in common other than crappy hips, and how he gushed about his life after a double replacement.

And I thought back to an email I'd received from a writer friend whose passion for playing ball mirrored my own. "I injured my back yet again," he wrote. "I'm back in physical a Fitbit and convinced myself that walking could fill my competitive void—and then walked so much that my knees hurt. I took up foam-rolling and dynamic stretching. I used a lacrosse ball to break up sore muscle tissue and tried to be a "supple leopard." Finally, this summer, I drove five hours south to Santa Barbara to learn just where my body stood.

There, tucked down a side street in a nondescript building, is Peak Performance Project (P3). Using sensors, force plates and a battery of cameras, and plugging that info into its algorithms, the lab has been evaluating athletes for a decade. The P3 database includes more than 800 players with NBA experience, as well as hundreds of other elite performers. I first visited for a story in 2014, writing about P3's role in injury prevention. As part of that process I, too, was evaluated. And among many humbling metrics, all charted against NBA players, I displayed the second-worst hip range of motion of anyone P3 had ever tested. That was at 40, right before my replacement. I was curious what I could learn from a side-by-side comparison seven years later.

Shortly after my arrival at the lab, the founder of P3 rolled in, hair still wet from surfing. Marcus Elliott, 56, trained at Harvard before entering sport science. He is the

kind of guy who can talk at length, extemporaneously, on seemingly any topic; who, during the pandemic, moved with his family to a German mountain village and hiked every day and taught his daughter math; and who engages in regular misogi tests of endurance and mental fortitude in which the chance of success is intentionally designed to be 50%, for that is when he believes we learn the most about ourselves. The last time I'd come through, he and some friends, including NBA guard Kyle Korver, had recently finished taking turns diving to the bottom of a harbor 30 miles south of Santa Barbara while rolling a large stone two miles on the seafloor. The feat took five hours, and they nearly puked from exhaustion, but the sense of accomplishment, Elliott says, lasted months.

Now he took inventory, inquiring about my various ailments and recent health history, and arranging for a 3-D body scan, which produced a hyperdetailed image of my physique, down to discrepancies in my muscle strength and limb length. The lab's lead physical therapist twisted and pulled on my appendages, pushing and prodding, trying to loosen up the tightest areas.

Then, as the P3 team had done seven years earlier, they attached nodes all over my body and put me in a red lycra top, which made me look like a deflated Mr. Incredible, so that I could flail through a series of exercises on force plates.

Only this time, everything was more difficult. The plastic slats of the vertical jump rack, once easy to leap up and swat, seemed to tower over me. Whereas years ago I had deftly hopped back and forth over an iron bar to measure lateral speed, this time I was lunging. P3's director of biomechanics, Eric Leidersdorf, watched as I went to great lengths to make up for the ravages of age and injury, landing duck-footed on the lateral test to better launch off my bad hip and nearly hyperextending my shoulder in attempting to reach just a bit higher on the vertical. "Bodies are master compensators," Leidersdorf observed. This, it became clear, is not necessarily a good thing.

The numbers were exactly what you might have guessed. All my measurements were down between 5% and 10%. When I landed on my left leg, I had 90 degrees of hip flexion, which is decent; but on my surgically repaired right side, I got only 17, the worst of anyone they'd ever seen. My hips no longer absorbed force, Elliott explained, which is "the kiss of death for NBA players." He also told me I was in the "Achilles rupture zone." Basically: "What you're doing"—playing basketball—"is super hard on your body."

The good news: Hope remains. P3's lead trainer guided me through two hours of exercises designed to activate my glute chain. I hopped from leg to leg; performed shoeless, one-footed deadlifts; pushed around 45-pound weights with the outside of my foot; and leaped repeatedly with hands on my hips, landing on both feet, like a sweaty Russian dancer. Afterward, I was directed to an $85,000 cryotherapy tank—basically, a futuristic phone booth, as imagined in an '80s rock video, replete with frost pouring out. Inside, I watched a timer tick off three minutes as the Foo Fighters' "Everlong" played and my body adjusted to the –220° chill, which, Elliott pointed out, "is colder than any of your ancestors have ever felt."

After the training, the PT, the cryotherapy and some cooldown stretching, I felt fantastic. My joints were loose, my back lacked its usual rigidity and, placebo or not, the cryotherapy seemed to have chilled my hip pain. That night, drinking a beer, I experienced a wave of nonalcoholic euphoria. *I've turned back the clock! Over-30 league, watch out!*

Alas, the next day, as I drove back to San Francisco, joints stiffened as the miles passed, reality setting back in. I knew by that night, life would rush back over me—the deadlines and dog walkings, picking up kids from practices and all the rest. I would not have the luxury of spending the better part of a given day focused on my body. I would trade the lavish P3 facility—with its cryo tank and antigravity treadmill and compression pants and elite PTs—for the carpeted floor of my garage and a handful of free weights.

There had to be another way. One that didn't cost P3's $1,800 a month or require vast swaths of free time. One that the average person could replicate.

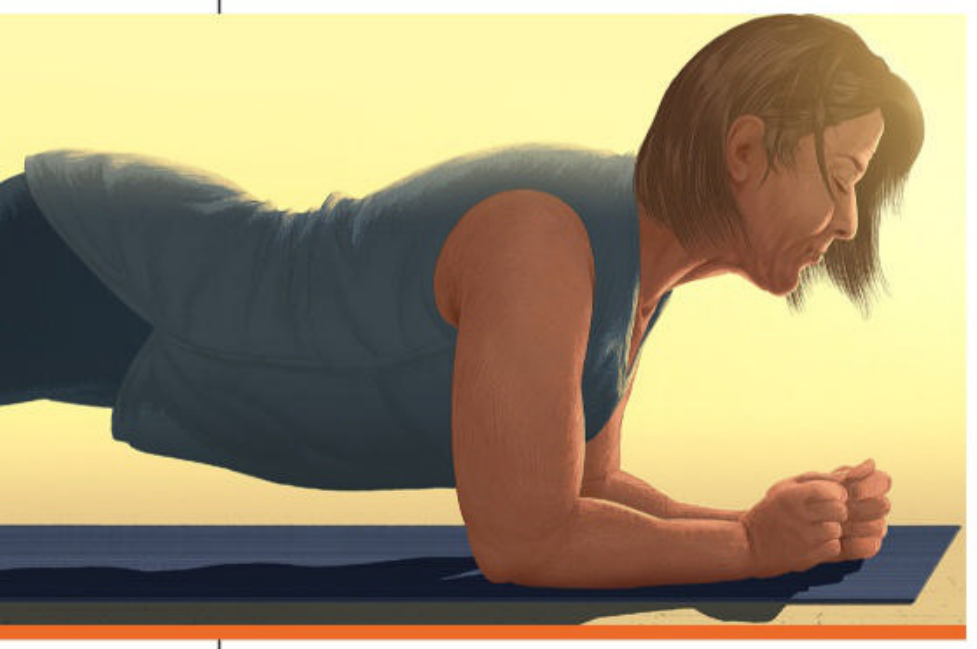
ELLIOTT'S GOAL: BE MEDIOCRE AT EVERYTHING. "THAT DOESN'T REALLY RESONATE WITH AMBITION," HE ADMITS, "BUT IT'S HARD, AS YOU GO THROUGH LIFE, TO SAY YES TO EVERYTHING."

EXERCISE. *Not too much. Mostly planks.*
Were you to boil down the keys to athletic longevity, as Michael Pollan once did for nutrition—*Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants*—this might be where you'd land. Then again, it might not be. If I learned one thing by diving into this world—reading the research, talking to the trainers and scientists and athletes—it's that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, it depends on who you are and how old you are, and it factors in your genes and injury history, your body's response to food and so, so many other things.

What we do know, broadly, is that quantity, quality and timing are crucial when it comes to the three core elements

of performance: exercise, nutrition and sleep. Even if you don't have the time or the money to take advantage of the latest breakthroughs, you can eat nutritious foods at optimal times, sleep in a way that best allows your body to repair itself and target your workouts to your goals. Too little exercise will undoubtedly do you in, but too much can also derail the aging body, it turns out.

So: Strengthen your core—planks are good, as are plenty of other exercises—so you can play the sports you love. Maximize your exercise time; for example, research shows that high-intensity interval training (HIIT) may add years to your life by changing your gene expression. Cross-train, rest and don't do stuff you shouldn't, like running on concrete if your joints ache. Most of all, know your body. Perhaps you find that short, heavy lifts once a week work for you, as they do for Baar. Or maybe, like Kerr now does, you focus on flexibility as a path to longevity.



Or perhaps you emulate Elliott, the P3 guru who in his 40s began setting long-term goals. One was to peak as a generalist at 65—to be able to say yes to everything, whether it was soccer or surfing or playing with his kids. It's essentially the opposite of his day job, which requires hyperspecialized training. (*How can we make this NBA player a better perimeter defender in 12 weeks?*) "Humans are such aspirational creatures. We relish the idea that we're going to be better tomorrow than we were today," Elliott says. But the big shift with aging is mental, embracing the idea that "you can really work at something—you can be really intentional—and your best hope is to only slowly get worse instead of quickly getting worse." So now Elliott's goal is to be "mediocre at everything."

"[That] doesn't really resonate with ambition," he admits. "But it's hard, as you go through life, to be able to say yes to everything."

It certainly helps if you know what you are playing for. Hirofumi Tanaka, the 55-year-old director of the Cardiovascular Aging Research Laboratory at the University of Texas, does 15 minutes of HIIT training each day at his office, sprinting up and down the carpeted hallways, sometimes forward, sometimes backward. His goal is to continue playing soccer with his students, and he has a simple equation for when he'll stop: "When it's no longer fun."

WHICH BRINGS us back to Bob Myers, who played his last pickup game in March 2018. Afterward, the pain was too much. For a while, he says he even considered taking opioids. What really got him was the absence of basketball. "It's always been my therapy," he says. "Not being able to get out my stress physically was a huge blow."

Being a methodical, organized sort, Myers spent months researching and calling all manner of people about hip replacements (including me—he wanted to know whether he'd still be able to play ball, and I told him he would, but it would be different). Then, last December, he underwent hip-resurfacing surgery. Afterward, he was disciplined in his recovery. But sometimes even the best information, access and care can't overcome the complexities of the aging body.

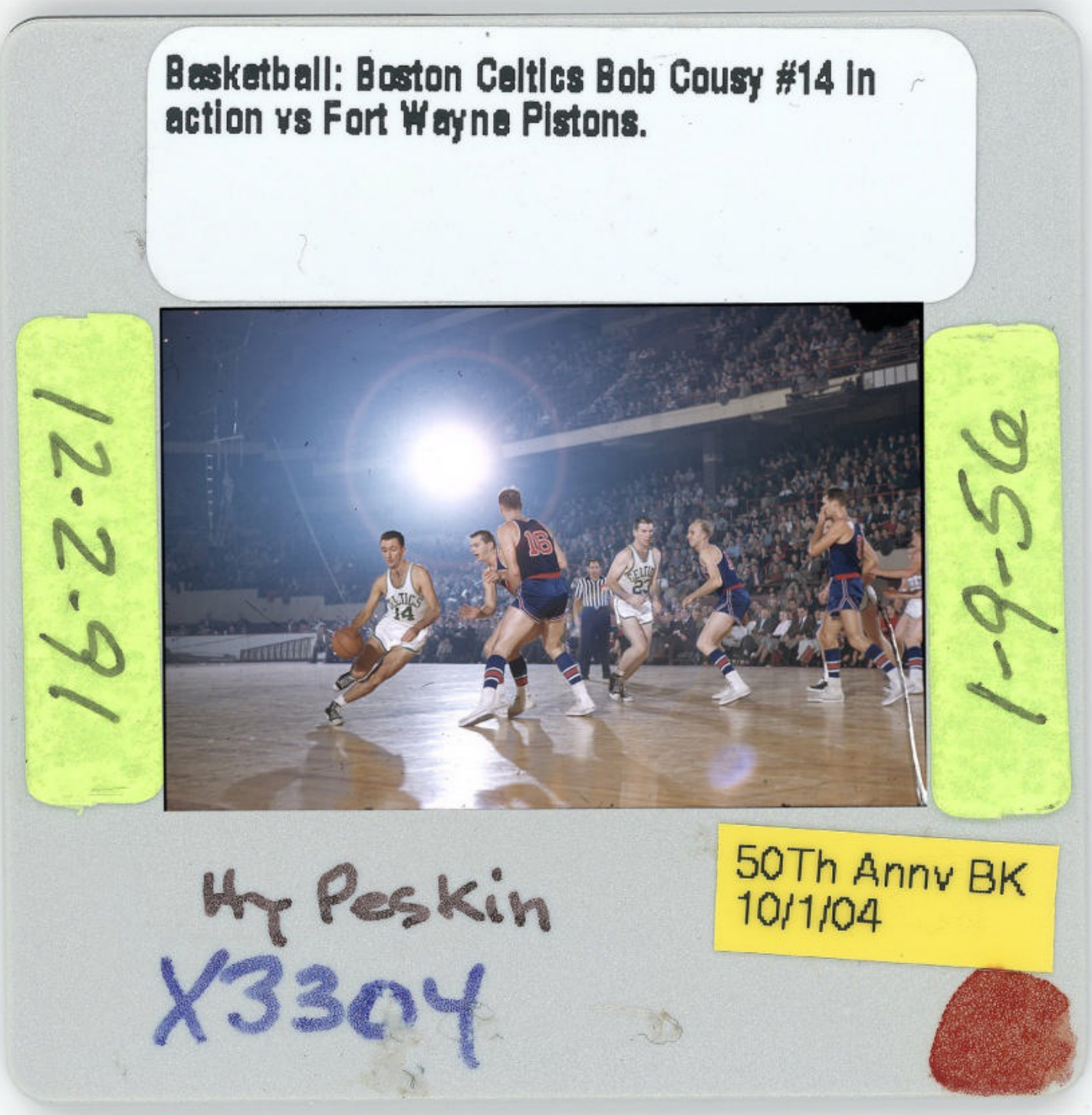
Myers had heard about people who are back on the court in seven months. But seven months out he was still in significant pain. He began wondering whether he'd ever be able to play again. "The experience was humbling," he says.

Finally, this summer, the pain subsided. His big takeaway, he says, is that we're all different. "We all have to run our own rehab." Now he proceeds cautiously. He does yoga and recently logged 23,000 steps at Disneyland with his kids. He's taken up pickleball as a gateway sport, knowing it's perfect for "the geriatrics with joint issues." Meanwhile, he'll start shooting baskets alone this fall, then he'll play pickup with the old guys and, if that goes well, return to playing with "the whippersnappers." In the meantime, Myers says it kills him to walk by a game—a feeling he acknowledges may not be entirely healthy. "But if you're going to have a vice, you could have worse ones than pickup basketball."

Going forward, he's willing to sacrifice. "I'll never stop wanting to play ball," Myers says. "That's probably the only thing that I 100% know."

As for me, I'm still rehabbing, pre-habbing, counting my steps, warming up and cooling down. And, because of that—*I think?*—I'm still able to play hoops once a week, if creakily. Whenever I get injured, or frustrated, which is often, I think about my father, a stoic Midwesterner who played into his mid-70s, even after a double knee replacement. When his right shoulder crapped out, he learned to shoot lefty. He's now 82; we played H-O-R-S-E not long ago.

He didn't do any of this to be an example. Nor did he do it to pass on some lesson, though I intuited one, anyway. It took me years to pick up on it, but now I think I get it, and it's what keeps me going: Eventually, what matters is not how you play, but that you play at all. □



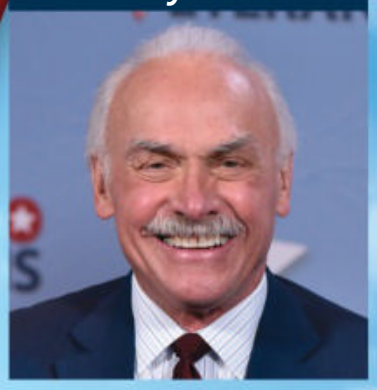
POINT AFTER

FLASH FORWARD

Of the four major men's pro leagues—NFL, MLB, NBA and NHL—the full history of Sports Illustrated aligns most closely with that of the NBA, which is celebrating its 75th anniversary this season. When SI was born in 1954, the eight-year-old NBA was a financially struggling novelty act—but the seeds of its future popularity were there. One of them: Celtics star and future Hall of Famer **BOB COUSY**, the subject of SI's Jan. 9, 1956, cover, the magazine's first to feature a pro basketball player. The original version of Hy Peskin's photo, which was cropped for the cover, is above. How slick was Cousy? Slick enough to make those two Fort Wayne Pistons pick each other. And good enough to make the NBA a staple of SI coverage for decades to come.

HY PESKIN

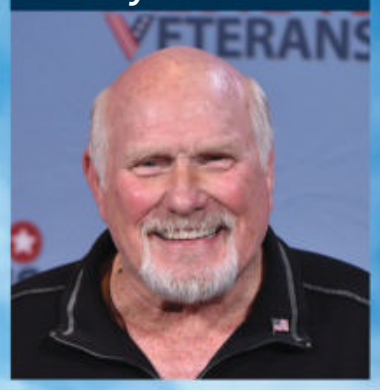
SALUTE TO VETERANS



★ Rocky Bleier ★

U.S. Army Veteran,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh

U.S.ARMY



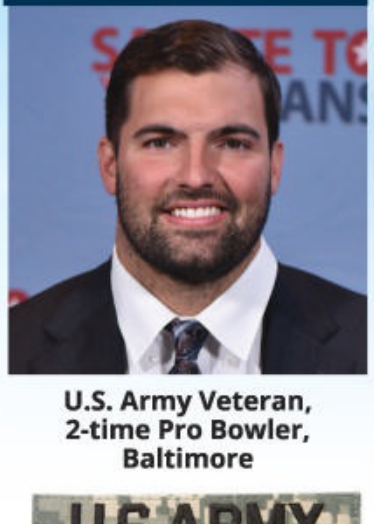
★ Terry Bradshaw ★

TV Host & Hall of Famer,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh

★ Greg Gadson ★

U.S. Army Veteran,
Honorary Captain,
2-time Champion, New York

U.S.ARMY



★ Alejandro Villanueva ★

U.S. Army Veteran,
2-time Pro Bowler,
Baltimore

U.S.ARMY

★ Joe Cardona ★

U.S. Navy Veteran,
2-time Champion,
New England

U.S. NAVY

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